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Mozart's Compositional Processes and Creative Complexity

Various of the nineteenth-century myths about Mozart have been slow to die. Some of the more spectacular ones, such as the alleged "involvement" of Salieri in Mozart's death, the "mysterious" circumstances surrounding the commission for the *Requiem*, and the notion of Mozart as a frivolous rake who happened to be a genius, have been kept alive in recent literary, theatrical or cinematic representations. There are other myths as well, concerning his compositional processes, which have left us with a thoroughly distorted impression of the composer. Foremost among these is the assertion that composition was completely effortless for Mozart, that he could simply write down fully conceived works. His life was short, a mere thirty-five years, but in that time he produced a prodigious number of works. In the minds of some, he was more of a clairvoyant than a craftsman, happily transmitting perfect creations sent to him from another world.

With respect to the notion that composition came easy for Mozart, the evidence points to something quite different. In the first instance, it should be noted that at the time of his death Mozart left a large number of fragments or unfinished works, well over 150 in fact (Wolff 191), not because he ran out of time as he did with the *Requiem*, but because he simply abandoned the projects, not knowing how to proceed or how to draw to a conclusion. Some of these fragments are only a few bars long, while others are hundreds of bars, and they reveal no consistent manner in breaking off. Similarly, there are extant sketches that accompany the manuscripts of completed works, showing that the composer had special

difficulties which could not be resolved in his head but had to be worked out on paper. Along with the sketches are numerous deletions or additions in the manuscripts, revealing an ongoing process of revision. Some Mozart scholars, in fact, suspect that there may have been many more sketches than those which have survived. The relative scarcity of sketches, compared to a composer like Beethoven who preserved an enormous quantity of sketches, does not necessarily suggest that the composer could write completely formed compositions in a continuous manner. It probably indicates that he simply discarded unnecessary sketches or drafts once a fair copy was ready, as we are now aware was the case with Schubert.

We also know that Mozart experienced various other types of compositional blockage, if one can call it that, relating, for example, to specific types of composition. String quartets gave him an unusual amount of difficulty, particularly the six he dedicated to Joseph Haydn, written over a period of a number of years. Indeed, in the dedication to Haydn, he notes that they were the "fruit of long and laborious effort" (Flothuis 155), and the evidence of this laboriousness is very much apparent in the manuscripts. Sketches for difficult passages and revisions are not unusual in these works, reflecting a more complex level of close motivic working and development than was previously seen in Mozart's works. For Mozart writing for quartets differed from other types of composition. Normally Mozart wrote out the first violin (or some other treble part) and bass lines before adding the inner parts and orchestration. For the quartets, however, he wrote the four parts simultaneously on a bar-by-bar basis, a process which places the higher premium on the integration of parts in quartet writing. In that integration one frequently finds a complex contrapuntal interaction, and the musical process of counterpoint usually gave Mozart the greatest difficulty.

The occurrence of fallow periods in the composer's career represented another type of blockage. Such periods were personal as well as compositional crises, and he clearly preferred that his father should remain ignorant of them, particularly the one occurring at the end of 1777 and throughout 1778 while he was in Augsburg, Munich, Mannheim and Paris, which may have been among the most important phases of his creative life. He had exceptional difficulty composing any works during this time, but happily wrote his father about projects and specific works

which were non-existent (Zaslaw 753-57; Tyson 938-9). Among the few works completed by Mozart during this period were a set of six violin sonatas written very much in the local style of Mannheim, thereby conforming to the type of work his father consistently urged him to write; the Paris symphony, performed at the Concert Spirituel; and a flute concerto and two quartets commissioned by a Dutch amateur flutist named De Jean. The commission was for three flute concertos and three quartets, with an offer of 200 gulden. Mozart wrote to his father about this early in December 1777, but two months later had done very little, writing to Leopold as follows: "I propose to remain here and finish entirely at my leisure that music for De Jean" (Anderson 461). Leopold was horrified that his son would be so casual when money was to be made, replying by the next post, "I was amazed to read your remark that you would now finish that music for M. De Jean at your leisure. It seems then that you have not yet delivered it" (479). Mozart never did complete the commission and consequently did not receive the full 200 gulden. Rather than write a second flute concerto he took an older concerto for oboe and changed the solo instrument.

The Mannheim-Paris episode was an extremely important one for Mozart in both compositional and personal terms. Leopold had duties to attend to in Salzburg and therefore sent his wife along with his son on this journey, the purpose of which was to secure a good musical position for Wolfgang. Upon setting out, Mozart was twenty-one years old, a young man now of age whose life was nevertheless dominated in all respects by his father. This was the first time that Mozart was out from under Leopold's close scrutiny, and he relished his freedom. Instead of the constant advice and direction, the most Leopold could now do was send a letter every few days. Letters were much easier to ignore than face to face lectures, and distorting the truth in letters was also much easier since Leopold had no reliable way of corroborating the stories he was being told. The regimen of composing now fell apart almost completely since Leopold's watchful eye was missing. While in Mannheim Mozart associated with persons who did not always have his best interests at heart, and he also fell in love with the talented young singer Aloysia Weber, whose sister he married a few years later.

In Paris he lived in the household of Baron Grimm, a man of letters and close friend of Diderot and Rousseau. Mozart's lack of industry

during this time was quickly sensed by Grimm who accused him of indolence and not actively pursuing contacts with the French nobility. There was a complete falling out between Mozart and Grimm, although Mozart remained at the house, staying in the apartment of Madame Louise d'Epinay, Grimm's mistress, a novelist, distinguished woman of letters, and confidante of Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire. She and Mozart remained on the best of terms, and one can only suspect that Mozart received a thorough education from her on the French *philosphes* and various other aspects of French culture. This spirit is very much reflected in his letters to his father, as his cheerful distortion of the truth follows a distinctly Voltairean model.

While events in Paris appeared to go badly for Mozart, he was clearly in no hurry to return to Salzburg. To his father he could say that he longed to see him but dreaded the return to the professional and social miseries of Salzburg. In reality his dread of returning undoubtedly included his father, and he skilfully delayed his return by a number of months in spite of Leopold's impassioned but impotent entreaties.

During this period, Mozart grew up. He tasted success, failure, bereavement, love, rejection, friendship, independence and idleness, and the seeds were sown for a composer who could get beyond the wunderkind and pleasing phase to a genius who could bring to bear all his humanity and complexity in his works. During the five years preceding the Mannheim-Paris journey, opera had not been a significant part of Mozart's output. That changed notably upon his return to Salzburg, as he immediately set to work on three large dramatic projects, *Semiramis*, a duodrama which is lost or perhaps never moved from his head to paper; *Thamos, König in Agypten*, a play for which he provided twelve choruses; and most notably the so-called *Zaide*, a *Singspiel* which was almost completed but was not given a title by Mozart. While audiences are not familiar with *Zaide*, this was in fact an important work for Mozart's future endeavors in opera. Aside from some strong arias, it has two highly developed ensembles, the second of which is a quartet with delineated characters and emotions, not unlike the well-known quartet in *Idomeneo* (Sadie 71). *Idomeneo* was written a year later and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* a year after that, and both had roles in securing Mozart's position as one of the greatest opera composers of all time. As with numerous other works, *Zaide* remained incomplete because

it failed to develop as a coherent work and was abandoned with good reason by Mozart.[1]

Concerning *Idomeneo* and *Die Entführung*, it seems unlikely that Mozart would have devised works of the depth of these had it not been for the nature of his encounter with life in Mannheim and Paris. In both cases we know a great deal about the process of composition through his correspondence with Leopold. In the case of *Idomeneo* he was living in Munich, and had to correspond through his father with the librettist Varesco who was in Salzburg. As for *Die Entführung*, Mozart was no longer in the service of the Archbishop, and was now living in Vienna. Various details of the composition were discussed with Leopold, now more out of courtesy to Leopold than any desire to receive advice. Major revisions were made to the libretto, all instigated by Mozart himself, both to make the text conform to his musical conception and also to add the depth and complexity that were lacking in the original Bretzner setting. Of very great interest is his comment on the composition of a particular aria: "I have explained to Stephanie [the librettist] the words I require for the aria—indeed I had finished composing most of the music for it before Stephanie knew anything whatever about it" (Anderson 768-9). As unlikely as the possibility of that may seem, Mozart explained the process to his father with the following remark about *Idomeneo*: "komponirt ist schon alles—aber geschrieben noch nicht" (everything is already composed—but not yet written down) (Flotuis 154). He could carry the music in his memory, although with the delays in completing this opera there were frustrations as well. One should not, however, be misled by this type of statement. Having the work in his head suggests that all he had to do was write it down. The work in his head, however, was not nearly as precise or clearly shaped as the one ultimately produced on paper.

In *Die Entführung*, one sees some of the musical, dramatic and human complexity characteristic of Mozart's late operas. His female characters, for example, are superior to their male counterparts in strength and breadth of character, and the conclusion of the opera, which may seem to arrive at a happy resolution, is anything but straightforward. The praises of the benevolent Bassa Selim are sung by all at the end, but benevolence in this case is largely an illusion. In releasing Belmonte, the Bassa finds an even more effective revenge than torture and execution.

With persecution he simply would have aroused the hatred of his most detested enemy, Belmonte's father, but as it is he has them in his power as they must now show him gratitude. His words to Belmonte are that he abhors his father too much to follow in his footsteps, and he looks at Belmonte not with benevolence but with contempt. The work ends deceptively, placing it on a very different level from Mozart's earlier more naïve works or the "Turkish" operas of his contemporaries which would reinforce benevolence. The now more mature and complex Mozart insisted on changes from his librettist, altering the original text to allow it to reflect a much darker outlook, an outlook Mozart came to during his fallow and self-searching experiences of 1778.

The deceptiveness at the end of this work characterizes his next three operas as well. Indeed, the Voltairean model apparent in his letters to his father of 1778 permeates these operas. In *Le nozze di Figaro*, the first of the three, Mozart found an author and work closely associated with Voltaire. The author of the play, Beaumarchais, exasperated by the treatment of Voltaire in France, took steps to rehabilitate his reputation. At the time of Voltaire's death no complete edition of his work existed, and Beaumarchais eagerly took the position of publisher of the project. The spirit of Voltaire underlies *Le mariage de Figaro*, which in fact contains the line "And Voltaire will never die." Indeed, a probable model for this work in both tone and situation, involving lovers' misunderstandings, letters going astray, disguises and reconciliations, is Voltaire's own early one-act comedy *L'Indiscret* (Besterman 103-4).

Musical deception abounds in Mozart's setting, and nowhere is this more evident than the conclusion of the work. The tone of the Countess's forgiveness of the Count offers a sense of profound regret, unlike Beaumarchais's lighter conclusion, and in her music lies the sad realization of the inevitability that the Count's immorality will continue. The work ends in reconciliation, but this is a ruse since the Countess recognizes the evil and human failure in the world she must inhabit. In Mozart's setting the human imperfections are accentuated, although this can easily slip by the unwary listener.

While deception dominates *Figaro*, Mozart takes us in *Don Giovanni* into the area of disorder. Here the sinner is exhalted and the forces of good are made to look inept: their members are murdered, beaten and raped, and when they capture villains they find them too slippery to hold.

The text and musical treatment place the audience in a position of not disliking the Don in spite of his deeds since he is charming. The audience, like Donna Elvira, can make a choice about him, and like her, they are seduced. For the conclusion of the work Mozart returns to deception, a ruse in which the audience can share. Mozart reinforces the ineptness of Don Giovanni's pursuers by reducing them to a vaudeville cast as they come forward in pairs or alone to tell the audience of their future plans. But the final insult stands in the singing of the moral itself. The contrapuntal style, conventionally liturgical, is treated by Mozart as a mocking caricature of the liturgical style. Even for those who miss this, Mozart does not allow the work to end seriously, as the concluding instrumental passage, with its sparkling humor and nose-thumbing gesture, offers the final comment on the work.

Cosi fan tutte stands as the most deceptive of all Mozart's operas, and the music carries the deception from beginning to end. Ensembles dominate Act I, but not ensembles of the order encountered in *Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*. Instead of carrying the action forward or presenting the listener with development or a sense of unfolding, these ensembles are in many respects very static, placing the characters in symmetrical relationships. The women sing in thirds or sixths, as do the men, and surprisingly little modulation occurs. The arias in this act do little to define character, and the musical hyperbole of Fiordiligi's "Come scoglio" seems to confirm that the work is, to quote Despina, "as absurd as any play."

With Fiordiligi's accompanied recitative and rondo (aria) in Act II ("Per pieta"), Mozart transforms the opera into something entirely different. Through the marked change in the nature of the music, she is set apart from her sister, given both personality and a clear sense of her moral imperative. Suddenly the balance of the work breaks down, and a character about to make the wrong choice, to commit evil, reveals that she understands the implications of her wrongdoing. The work cannot go back to what it was: the arias which follow disrupt the prior naïve symmetry as the conventional order of the balanced ensembles gives way to contemplation of serious issues. The sense of order in Act I, the shallowness of the characters, and the conceits of comic opera are now placed in relief. Beneath the surface order and simplicity lie potential disunity, complexity, and some very raw moral nerves. The finale to Act

II returns to the ensemble writing of the first half of the work, but the balance and order are deceptions.

While deception can be revealed in opera through the alliance of music and librettos, similar processes are no less apparent in instrumental works. Symmetry is the fundamental element of the various instrumental forms, and Mozart's manipulation of it demands that the listener not simply accept that order can be equated to balance. Indeed, symmetry may very well be a ruse, an aural illusion of order. This strikes one particularly in two of the last three symphonies, Nos. 39 and 41, by which time Mozart was well aware of Haydn's new symphonic model. In his Paris Symphonies (especially No. 83), Haydn had defined processes of development and intelligibility in which the dramatic interaction of opposing forces could be followed to a logical conclusion. This conclusion, through synthesis or co-existence of opposites, revealed enlightened principles of morality, tolerance or refinement (Schroeder 84-8). The process of sonata form was not one of perfect equilibrium, but allowed for disruption, contrast or opposition which would strengthen order or morality through testing or argument.

Mozart quite consciously avoids this process in the two symphonies in question. His development sections are shortened to the point of being non-developmental, and his key changes in expositions do not draw attention to the instability of modulation. Expositions and recapitulations are sometimes close to identical, and with the simplicity of the modulation, key change does not become an issue. By emphasizing balance and avoiding development, Mozart in effect adumbrates the opposite, the disorder which lurks beneath the surface.

It should not escape our notice that symmetrical passages are the ones that Mozart composed with the least amount of difficulty, that he could compose in his head. In fact, there may be an irony here which the composer exploits, that the easier the work is to write, the greater is the deception and implied complexity. With the delicacy and balance of a work such as his *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, written at the same time as *Don Giovanni*, Mozart takes us on what may seem a walk on eggshells. We wait for the inevitable false step, but by avoiding it he presents us with a world he knows is too perfect to exist. In this irony lies a possible combination of compositional process and creative complexity, a deception about craftsmanship with implications for interpretation.

NOTE

1. A recent "completion" by Nicholas Temperley of an act from one of these other works, *L'Oca del Cairo* (1783), presented at the 1991 American Musicological Society meeting in Chicago, seemed a pointless attempt to find something in the work Mozart himself had rejected.

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