**Eighteenth-Century Classicism: Tradition and Innovation**

WOLFGANG A. MOZART • Symphony no. 39 in E-flat major, K. 543

WOLFGANG A. MOZART • Concerto for Violin and Orchestra no. 3 in G major, K. 216

LUDWIG V. BEETHOVEN • Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21

Surprisingly little is known of the circumstances of composition and performance of Mozart’s final three symphonies, traditionally seen, somewhat disrespectfully to Haydn, as the most glorious of eighteenth-century summatory symphonic statements. We know that they were written within a six-week-period during the summer of 1788, perhaps for autumn subscription concerts ‘in the Casino’ on the Spiegelgasse in the centre of Vienna, which may or may not have taken place, or perhaps with a visit to London in mind; the one does not necessarily exclude the other. Posterity has nevertheless made them its own, although the 39th, lacking either the minor key of the 40th, or the finality and the nickname of the ‘Jupiter’ has, for no good reason, slightly lacked the popularity of its two successors.

It is the only work of the three to open with a slow introduction, its E-flat major grandeur presaging the summatory magnificence of *Die Zauberflöte*. Lavish woodwind writing, bearing the hallmarks of serenade and operatic experience alike, not to mention that of the piano concertos, underlines and indeed enhances the harmonic tension, whose release marks the lighter, almost *buffa*-like onset of the exposition proper. ‘Lightness’ is in many respects deceptive; it performs the role of an operatic foil, incomprehensible without what has come before and what will come after. The almost-text-book quality of the sonata form thereafter might seem conventional – until one listens. Here we discover, if ever we doubted it, that Mozart’s sense of balance, of formal adventure, of development, of return will always surprise us; the devil and angel are in the detail. As Donald Tovey so admirably put it, ‘The composer … is not the man who, having got safely through the exposition, turns with relief to the task of copying it out into the right keys for the recapitulation; but he is the man who conceives the exposition with a vivid idea of what effect it will produce in the recapitulation.’

If the slow movement, in A-flat major, the subdominant, lacks a development section as conventionally understood, that is only because development continues throughout the recapitulation; such is the ‘developing variation’ Schoenberg discerned in Brahms and in his own music, and for which he worshipped Mozart. So much for ‘conventional understanding’; all is transformed by what has come before. ‘Lack’, however, is quite the wrong way to think about it; Mozart here conceives, as Tovey might have put it, the themes with their variation in mind, not least the dark, stormy transition to the second group, and the complexity of the harmonic journey from and to the tonic key. Here the tonal system stands before us like a Newtonian universe to be navigated; Mozart is our sure yet adventurous harmonic (and enharmonic) guide. The aristocratic grandeur of the Minuet recalls Mozart’s adorable ‘occasional’ dances for Vienna, yet its woodwind luxuriance marks it out as something still more. Of that greater profundity there can be no doubt in the Trio, which transports us to a serenaders’ Elysium, even to the pleasure-in-pain sado-masochism of *Così fan tutte*.

Thematic economy marks the finale, its second theme a development of the first, without the slightest hint of melodic parsimony: Mozart the master conjurer surprises us whether his hat contains a single rabbit or twenty. It seems over in a flash, quicksilver operatic resolution both superficially similar to and yet, in Mozart’s particular brand of theatrical ‘characterisation’, quite different from that to a Haydn finale. The kinetic energy experienced in the first movement and, before it, in the character of Don Giovanni, is intensified and runs its firework-like course; it fizzes like the champagne traditionally consumed in the nobleman’s ‘Finch' han del vino’, and what a vintage this is!

All five of Mozart’s violin concertos were composed in 1775, perhaps intended for the leader of the Salzburg court orchestra, Antonio Brunetti; both Mozart and Brunetti certainly enjoyed playing the works. The Third, in G major, composed in September of that ‘violin year’, is generally held, and not without reason, to mark a step forward from its two predecessors; at any rate, it has long proved popular with soloists and audiences alike. As ever with Mozart, indeed as we have just seen (and heard), there is a strong affinity with the world of opera. Although the fully ‘mature’ operatic composer had yet to burst forth in *Idomeneo*, he was already on the cusp, with *La finta giardiniera* and *Il re pastore* his most recent essays in the genre.

The virtue of operatic ‘surprise’ – think, looking forward, of the disguises, concealments, and sudden appearances of *Le nozze di Figaro* – is certainly to be heard in the G minor *Andante* interpolation to the rondo finale and indeed in its folksier (cunningly-placed inner-part drones and all) successor episode. Moreover, the opening theme of the first movement *Allegro* is taken – and, of course, developed – from *Il re pastore*, composed for a Salzburg visit the previous year by Archduke Maximilian Francis. Performance, we should remember, was almost always the *raison d’être* of a Mozart work, however much, as with those final three symphonies, we may wish to claim them for posterity. There is an exploratory-without-experimentalism sense to this *Allegro*, almost as if the composer wished to visit as many keys as the material would decently allow, but no more. Classical propriety was never a restriction to Mozart; instead, it tended to offer a compositional spur, with which he might then offer us the rarest of aural sweetmeats. His ear for wind colour never deserts him, whether here or in the aria-like, D major slow movement, whose cantilena sounds all the more exalted set against muted orchestral strings. Alternation between oboes (first and third movements) and flutes (second), horns heard in all three, suggests that orchestral players might have doubled parts, a common Salzburg practice, especially in the court orchestra. (That, you may be relieved to hear, is unlikely to be imitated by even the wilder reaches of contemporary ‘historically informed performance’.)

Whereas Mozart’s symphony was conceived as part of a very eighteenth-century ‘set’ and the concerto had at least become part of one by default, the symphony was, by the time of Beethoven, already something more singular, more ‘Romantic’ even. Brahms, keen to distinguish between novelty and ‘inner value’, remarked in 1896 that, although Beethoven’s First Symphony had offered a ‘new outlook […] the last three symphonies by Mozart are much more important!’ We may or may not agree; few of us, whilst acknowledging the debt owed – and repaid – to Mozart and Haydn in Beethoven’s symphonies, and not just his earliest symphonies, would deny also the novelty apparent here from the word go – or rather, from the celebrated opening in the ‘wrong’ key, or rather with a C major dominant seventh chord foreign to the tonic key, whose emphatic statement requires a struggle of its own rather than be presentation as a mere given.

The ‘right’ key, C major, may well have been chosen with Mozart’s *Jupiter* and Haydn’s Symphony no.97 in mind, with, to quote Elaine Sisman, ‘the purpose of homage, of placing himself within a tradition, laced with one-upmanship, and casting the result in the most brilliant conventional and instantly recognisable of eighteenth-century symphonic modes: the “C major symphony” tradition with its trumpets and drums and “ceremonial flourishes”.’ At any rate, triumph in Beethoven is always hard won. The simplicity of the opening theme, echoing perhaps that of the opening movement to Mozart’s E-flat Symphony, following the tension of their respective introductions, is already called into question by the sequence at its close, in which the exposition’s goal already seems set. ‘It is the opening,’ wrote Tovey, ‘of a formal rather than of a big work,’ a nice distinction reinforced when we think of it in Mozartian context, but also a distinction against which Beethoven struggles. The concision of the development is perhaps more Haydnesque than Mozartian, but the splendour of the coda, whilst owing much to eighteenth-century rejoicing, is already on a scale we might acclaim as Beethovenian.

We return to the F major in which the symphony allegedly opened for the *Andante*, its opening theme as playful as anything in the music of his great predecessors, its courtly quality undeniably post-Mozartian, yet also seemingly straining towards greater ‘weight’. Haydn’s inspiration looms large, not least from trumpets and drums (reminiscent of the late Masses as much as the symphonies); and yet the abiding memory remains that of the opening theme. It is a score-draw, then, between Mozart and Haydn, albeit with Beethoven himself firmly in the lead. The scherzo-in-all-but-name, which Beethoven still describes as a minuet, is perhaps the most unambiguously ‘Beethovenian movement’. There is Romantic mystery, moreover, in a trio which Tovey saw, ‘with its throbbing wind-band chords and mysterious violin runs’, as foretelling ‘Schumann’s most intimate epigrammatic sentiments’. Perhaps; to these ears, the *Harmoniemusik* is more a tribute, touchingly earnest, almost literal, to Mozart. There is no need, of course, to choose one or the other; a fine performance will likely suggest both. The expectancy sensed in the introduction to the finale is, rightly, of quite a different nature from that to the first movement. Here is a skittishness that takes Haydn as its starting-point, but only a starting-point; here, perhaps more clearly than in previous movements, the *echt*-Beethovenianrole of rhythm (not just syncopations, but certainly them) and harmony in supporting, surprising, propelling each other is the order of the day. The timpani part alone makes that dynamically, explosively clear.

And so, with this work, written in 1800, the final year of the eighteenth century, we hear as good a candidate as any for Beethoven bidding that century and its careful balance of tradition and innovation a fond, if less than final, farewell. Haydn would offer one last great C major triumph the following year, with his oratorio, *The Seasons*, its libretto by Beethoven’s symphonic dedicatee, Gottfried van Sweiten, although Haydn’s countervailing Romanticism is perhaps still greater than that of Beethoven’s at this stage. The next time Beethoven would conclude a symphony in C major, in his Fifth, the musical world around him, shaped to an almost incredible extent by him, would seem very different indeed.