‘Austro-German’ Symphonism and ‘National Style’: Synthesis and Originality

FRANZ SCHUBERT • Overture “in the Italian Style” in D, D. 590

WOLFGANG A. MOZART • Symphony No. 38 in D, K. 504, “Prague” Symphony

LUDWIG V. BEETHOVEN • Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 36

Bright open strings, trumpets, drums: such are the stereotypical associations of orchestral works in D major, perhaps especially during the Baroque and Classical periods. Schubert’s D major Overture was the first of two such works he composed ‘in the Italian style’, although that tag was not Schubert’s own, added after the event by his brother, Ferdinand. At any rate, the influence of Rossini – also to be felt in the composer’s Sixth Symphony, on which he began work in 1817, the same year that he wrote these overtures – is the reason, although such influence can readily be exaggerated, and often has. There is certainly a Rossinian surface to the work, especially in its orchestral crescendo, doubtless inspired by the first performances of Rossini operas in Vienna the previous year; nevertheless, form remains typical of ‘early’ Schubert. Both he and Rossini, of course, owed a good deal to Mozart. If the prominence of the woodwind might suggest Rossini, it might equally be a nod to Mozartian *Harmoniemusik*, or it might simply be characteristic of Schubert. Likewise, one might hear Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony in the transitional repeated notes between opening *Adagio* and the main *Allegro giusto*, or one might simply think of the way paved for Schubert’s later symphonies. There is certainly much ‘Viennese’ charm, not so characteristic of either Rossini or Beethoven, and a good deal to compare with Schubert’s later writing, not least his music for *Rosamunde*. Accented notes are characteristic; so are the introduction’s modulations. The coda, moreover, may be heard to offer presentiments of the ‘Great’ C major Symphony. Whether ‘Italian’, ‘Austrian’, or simply Schubert, the Overture is a splendid curtain-raiser – fully worthy of hearing, especially in an age such as ours, in which concert overtures have become strangely unfashionable.

‘Nationality’ is, according to inclination, either a fraught or a supremely irrelevant issue for Mozart and his music. Was he ‘Austrian’? Only in an anachronistic sense, for Salzburg would not become part of Austria until 1805, and then initially only for four years. ‘German’? That is how he tended to describe himself, as did many others within the Holy Roman Empire: in many respects, more a (frustratingly slow) legal system than a state, whose crown Joseph II declared only to be worthwhile on account of the troops it brought him. Prague was generally considered just as much a ‘German’ city as Vienna, and it was, famously, a source of great happiness to Mozart. But there was nothing narrowly nationalistic to his works for that city or elsewhere; *Don Giovanni* and the ‘Prague’ Symphony owed a great deal to Italianate models too. Indeed, a hallmark of eighteenth-century German cultural identity was its proud, cosmopolitan receptiveness to varied styles; and Vienna remained a celebrated haven for Italian musicians. Prague itself offered early performances of *Die Zauberflöte* in German in 1792, and in 1794, both in Czech and Italian. The symphony itself, however ‘German’ it was to become, derived from the Italianate opera *sinfonia*.

But let us return specifically to the *Prague* Symphony. It has been suggested, for instance by Daniel E. Freeman, that the lack of a minuet and trio, and thus the symphony’s three-movement form, was a nod to Prague; it is certainly at odds both with Mozart’s and Vienna’s practice, and the symphonies of Mozart’s friend, Josef Mysliveček, are all in three movements. Charles Rosen, in his book, *Sonata Forms*, described it as ‘Mozart’s most massive achievement in the symphonic genre – a work which unites grandeur and lyricism as no other.’ Prague’s enthusiasm for Mozart’s music has often and not without reason contrasted with Vienna’s often lukewarm reception. The warmth of its reception for *Le nozze di Figaro* may have emboldened the composer, as it certainly would in the case of *Don Giovanni*, to write one of his more complex, profound creations. We do not know specifically ‘why’ it was written, but intention for Prague is a harmless and possibly revealing myth. Completed in December 1786, the symphony was taken with him on his visit early the following year to the German-Bohemian city, in which he conducted a performance of *Figaro* as well as the premiere of this work. The world of *opera buffa*, albeit Mozart’s own dramatically heightened and darkened *opera buffa*, or soon-to-come Giovanni-esque *dramma giocoso*, haunts its pages. Mozart certainly took advantage of the renowned talents of the Prague woodwind players, his writing for that section seductively euphonious even by his own exalted standards. One of the composer’s earliest biographers, Franz Xaver Niemetschek, always proud to point to Bohemia’s affinity with the Salzburger and *vice versa*, pointed to Mozart having ‘judged with extreme accuracy’ in this work ‘the nature and range of all instruments … the exact time and place to make his effect,’ resulting in ‘the admiration of all experts’.

A lengthy slow introduction to the first movement signals its weight: child to the *Sturm und Drang* and father to Beethoven’s ‘expansion’ of symphonic form. Mozart’s own symphonic sonata form is arguably deepened further by its incorporation of elements of the ritornello form familiar from the composer’s piano concertos. Counterpoint and harmony, as so often in mature Mozart, stand in a relationship which, often depending on performance style, may suggest either the most perfect balance or the most daring dialectic – or both. It is counterpoint, born both of Mozart’s recent immersion in works by Bach and Handel and of his experience of earlier, ‘Austrian’ composers such as Fux, which holds the key to connection between the profusion of melodic figures, unusual even by Mozart’s standards. They appear first in turn in the exposition, like characters in an opera, then entwine, *Figaro*-like, in ensemble, always, as in his symphonies and operas alike, under the benign, dynamic goal-orientation of his tonal choices. Combinations present themselves anew, answering to the musico-dramatic requirements of the moment: ever-fresh, ever-surprising, ever-convincing. As H.C. Robbins Landon once observed, truthfully if with exaggeration, Haydn surprises us with the unexpected; Mozart surprises us with the expected.

The slow movement is, typically for Mozart, written in the subdominant, G major. Its compound duple (6/8) meter permits all manner of sinuous chromatic deepening, both melodic and harmonic. Quicksilver shifts, here and in the finale, between major and minor, remind us once again of Mozart’s operatic stage and his ability to smile through tears. The finale may have been written first of all; some scholars believe it was originally intended as a replacement finale for the *Paris* Symphony, KV 297/300*a*. Mozart’s world of dramma giocoso returns, woodwind once again cast their magic spell, busy *Presto* syncopations hurtling towards the joyous final affirmation of D major. Darker worlds, darker forces, have been summoned up during the *Andante* and cannot be forgotten, but Classical tonality will still permit cheerful, though certainly not blithe or uncaring, resolution.

If the *Prague* Symphony marked significant expansion of symphonic scope and form, so too of course did Beethoven’s symphonic arrival – and not just in his Third Symphony, the so-called *Eroica*. It is understandable that his first two symphonies are often compared to Mozart and Haydn, but they have their own character, and could certainly not be mistaken for the work of anyone else. They too have their elements of international ‘synthesis’, although by this stage in musical history, we are, rightly or wrongly, far more likely to think of compositional ‘originality’ – a Romantic concept of ‘genius’ if ever there were one – rather than ‘influence’ upon its creator. Interestingly, Rosen mentions the work with the utmost brevity in *Sonata Forms*, simply in terms of its influence upon Schubert, and not at all in *The Classical Style*. Yet, as Sir Donald Tovey remarked, ‘Beethoven’s Second Symphony was evidently larger and more brilliant than any that had been heard up to 1801.’

The first movement also opens with a slow introduction, but it tends more towards Haydn’s example than Mozart’s; as Tovey again noted, ‘it is Haydn’s way to begin his introduction, after a good *coup d’archet* with a broad melody fit for an independent slow movement.’ Duly imposing chords, such as we have heard from both Schubert and Mozart, are responded to in melting – ‘feminine’, to employ the idiom of nineteenth-century musical criticism – fashion. If we remain in the mood for ‘influence’, then we might also find Haydn’s in the first theme of the exposition proper. It is certainly no melody ‘in the Italian style’ but a typically ‘Germanic’ motivic building-block, yet one whose various components may be taken apart, expanded, in a word ‘developed’. Both tonal world and motivic material, then, are ripe for exploration; so is the young, although not so very young, Beethoven. The eruption of the coda certainly looks forward to any number of Romantic successors, though Beethoven not so much obscures as renders sublimely irrelevant the dualism of ‘Classical or Romantic’.

The *Larghetto*, according to Tovey, ‘one of the most luxurious slow movements in the world,’ offerswarmth and soulfulness with an *Innigkeit* that seems, at least in retrospect, as ‘German’ as the composer from Bonn who yet settled in Vienna. Chamber music writ large pays homage to the Classical divertimento, so does Beethoven’s unusually Mozartian profligacy of melodic material. The scherzo, the very idea of such a movement not the least of Beethoven’s innovations, is small, yet utterly typical in its concision and tension, and downright explosive quality. Its trio may relax, yet it offers dialectical struggle too: not least between post-Mozartian *Harmoniemusik* – of a very different variety from Schubert’s, yet doubtless with that common root – and a dazzling whirlwind vortex of proto-Romantic string-writing. The rondo finale has Beethoven’s gruff humour propelled by that ‘goal orientation’ which has been the hallmark of symphonism, and, in its denial, anti-symphonism ever since. Not for nothing did Stravinsky, perhaps the twentieth century’s greatest foe of the Classical-Romantic German ‘synthesis’, construct his æsthetic upon denial of Beethoven and Wagner; not for nothing, however, did he re-admit Beethoven to his pantheon when composing his Symphony in C.