

As a composer I am often asked a very curious question. "What is the most beautiful piece of music ever written" - as if beauty or art could be assigned Consumer Report rankings. I would be hard pressed to even guess what piece is at the top of the most beautiful charts. To recognize beauty in itself depends on so many variables; one man's beauty is the next man's ugliness. Similarly I am asked 'what piece of music is the most difficult to play on the piano " - this is an easier question to answer for it is a concrete-technical question and technique can be concretely discussed bearing no mystical or metaphysical overtones. In our Guinness Book of Records age, such innocent questions are understandable. Yet in our age of comparisons the question never asked about music is - what is the dumbest piece of music you know? Here I have a lot of nominations which I can offer without hesitation. My nomination for the first class piece of musical silliness (Pop music. aside where silliness spawns sales) is a piece of music by none other than our decades hero composer, the saviour of the symphony orchestra, the saviour of the musical publicity business - is by W.A. Mozart.

The piece in question is his MUSIKALISCHER SPASS or MUSICAL JOKE. Mozart's Joke is a piece of galumphing awkwardness or monumentally contrived stupidity... furthermore it is so difficult to program for reasons of its musical sophistication ...because listeners would not get the "Joke" which furthermore it would be as embarrassing for its performers as a muffed joke would be for a bumbling comedian.

On hearing Mozart's Joke, our reaction might well be "whatever got into Wolfgang Amadeus for writing such a thing worthy of PDQ Bach - and, even more peculiar, this Joke is not an early Mozart work but a late work listed by Koechel in his catalogue as K. 522. Why did he write it? I really don't know, but I'm going to guess and attempt a little and by so doing attempt a little musical deconstructionism. The "Joke" is billed as a sextet for two horns and strings and a peculiar quartet of strings, it is viz. two violins, cello and contrabass. For the disappearance-of the original score we must blame none other than Franz Schubert for giving it away to his friend Huttenbrenner; thus we have only the playing parts and these indicate that performances doubled the parts thus making it a work for string orchestra rather than an odd quartet of strings.

To confuse matters more (and this may be at the heart of this esoteric piece) the sextet goes under several different names. The Germans tell us it is music for Village Musicians, this title implying Mozart wished to poke fun of musical country bumpkins; the French make of it "un plesantrie" - a diversion or

music not to be taken seriously. We, in English, simply call it a "musical joke" and its this English "joke" perspective which I will consider at greater length in a moment.

Just what occasioned the piece is another puzzling question and I cannot imagine the circumstances of its first performance, for whom it was written or even why it was written. In what I term stupid sophistication, Mozart's Joke becomes a very arcane, a very secretive piece. It is a Joke that few people get. Performers are afraid to tell this joke even though it is contrived by the hallowed Wolfgang. They are afraid that if they play what is written on the page, the audience will think what awful players they are. This is truly a joke which passes every understanding. The truth is of course, that the piece requires very sophisticated and knowing musical sensibilities.

What is a joke? Here's where I get academic, but it is a question which must be asked if we are to be clear in our understanding. Let Webster be our guide. A joke is an amusing story with an unexpected punchline. Let me tell you a few jokes...in the name of greater academicism: (see attached )

They are all verbal concoctions and besides their unexpected punchline they also teach (or imply) something about human nature. The story about the ties tell us that even as the mother is thoughtful about her son and buying him ties, the relationship of mother and son is really a no-win situation for the son and we realize that any sense of freedom which the son thinks he might have is really an illusion. Of course, the mother is also depicted as a controlling power tripper. The story then is an object of mother-son relationships, if the mother understood the story's point, she would let go and emancipate her son to his freedom, thereby obtaining her own freedom from power tripping from her own compulsion for control. The story then is an object lesson in mother-son relationships.

Now how do we apply these verbal standards to such an abstract, non- verbal enterprise as music? Program note annotators tell us that Mozart's Joke concerns music as humor - the wrong notes, the discordant ending where the performance just collapses, the crudeness of the inspiration. Humor in music is hard to contrive, to pull off successfully, yet there are many examples of humor in music. I'm thinking, off the top of my head, of Beethoven's RAGE OVER A LOST PENNY, Stravinsky's CIRCUS POLKA FOR A YOUNG ELEPHANT, Eric Satie's THREE PIECES IN THE FORM OF A PEAR, or Martin Marais' music to accompany a gall bladder operation - yet all of these pieces define their humor by their titles which set the listener up verbally. The difference between the pieces I've just mentioned and Mozart's joke is that they are all of sound workmanship while Mozart's is truly of shoddy manufacture - yes, shoddy... or so bad that its badness is good. Clearly Mozart's piece is a perverse piece.

Why did he write it? This humor being totally different from the outrageous, scatological humor of his letters - but we really should hear the piece, and if you don't laugh and you got 80 in your Materials course, the Faculty should proclaim a right to change your grade downwards.

How did Mozart shape this wacky sonata-allegro? The opening measures reveal musical inspiration at its lowest. After the opening chords of Tonic-Dominant harmony, the measures which follow have no relationship to what came before; they are non-sequitur. At the point of modulation there is one measure which seems to aim at modulating to the dominant by V/V but lands right back in the opening key of F; it is like changing directions while going through a revolving door. This feeble effort to modulate fails and we hear four measures of pure accompaniment to a non-existing melody.

The development section moves to arbitrary keys and sequences; the composer is clearly not in control of his material...which means he is incompetent. The recapitulation occurs without warning; the recap is unchanged from the opening which makes the music hear even more dismal and stupid, like a bad joke told twice. MENUETTO Mozart's incompetent composer next attempts to compose a heroic minuet with the most banal of materials. He (the composer) also misplaces the repeat signs thereby creating a five measure extension which is formally out of balance and totally unnecessary. The Minuet's trio consists of little more than aimless scales in the violin; the music is doggedly dull, vigorously avoiding the slightest invitation to inspiration.

ADAGIO - The slow movement consists of a sugary violin solo with a totally inappropriate stone-faced accompaniment. (PLAY ACCOMPANIMENT FIRST). The cadenza is pure Charlie Chaplin...its non-musicality needs no explanation.

RONDO FINALE - It begins well enough but soon dissolves pompously into a mock stretto which achieves inspired stupidity. Why? Because stretto is a contrapuntal device should be climactic; what we hear simply fizzles out, its two measure subject just lays there, as deflated as the coyote in a Road-Runner cartoon.

Mozart's Musical Joke is obviously a satire on compositional incompetence. But can we not extract a deeper interpretation from this divertimento (or pervertimento as Peter Schickel might have it) can we not glean a more positive aesthetic from Mozart's shenanigans? Can we even construct a standard for compositional excellence from this seemingly slap-dash musical burlesque. Can we not second-guess Mozart? I think we can. In fact, I think we can formulate a guide to sophisticated compositional procedure which distinguishes excellent craftsmanship from the merely routine.

Mozart makes fun of, in order of appearance; 1) weak inspiration which is uncritical of itself; we hear that in the Joke's opening measures. He further lampoons mismatched musical ideas (as we hear in the ADAGIO's accompaniments), jerry-built phrases which are either too long or too short, or phrases which simply pad, particularly at cadential points - or to paraphrase Stravinsky "most music goes on too long after its over." In short, Mozart thumbs his nose at invention (or creativity) lacking musical direction. If we reverse these negative features to positive ones, then I believe Mozart indirectly implies what musical craftsmanship and excellence are all about. The "Joke" in fact, is a miniature compendium or guide to what a composer ought to strive for. Let me list some for you.

Two factors stand at the head of the list which impart excellence to any music regardless of style. These are 1) functionality and 2) proportion. Function refers to a sense of musical direction which is goal directed, it is cumulative in nature and to the listener imparts a feeling of intention realized. (In the simplest sense this sense of direction is illustrated by an admonition we learn in Materials - don't leap away from the leading tone!) The most monumental example I know illustrating this point is the cataclysmic pedal-point climax found in the Beethoven LEONORE OVERTURE #3. (PLAY) Proportion refers to the relationship of all parts to the whole. This is a matter of harmonious balance of all sections to the whole. Here Mozart, Beethoven, Hayden, Bach, Brahms lead the pack while others, even such great composers as Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Stravinsky, Schoenberg - lag behind. (Improvised musics, viz, jazz or ethnic, never achieve this ultimate balance. Nor does electronic music.)

From what I have said you will realize Mozart's Joke is not merely a joke. It concerns itself with the art of music as an highest ideal; this ideal involves focusing on an object, to make it delectable to human faculties, illuminating our daily existence with beauty, and this beauty lifts us out of ourselves. Music, above any other art, possesses such transforming powers. Mozart's Joke reminds us of those values which we as musicians should cherish. This secret strength will, like Mozart's "Joke" make us laugh. And that's good.

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