



The
HAMLINE
REVIEW

A Faculty Annual

Volume Twelve / Spring 1988

Mozart in F

by
Christine L. Hansen

I intended to write a philosophic essay on the beautiful in music. I intended to discuss Life

Insomuch as we recognize the protean nature of our condition, we are as we have always been; and despite advances in technology and in our understanding of politics and psychology, Life continues unaltered and ruthlessly finite, from century to century;

and Truth

That quality which is both unalterable and everlasting, that quality which is held to prove past experience and fortify present observation, that quality which remains elusive and valuable, is Truth;

which is the basis for Art

To wrestle with such things as Truth and Beauty, to attempt to understand and then to recast into a form or image the truth as understood and intuited, and finally to separate the form from the creator: that is Art;

and the dual basis of Art, to entertain

What is pleasing? Sweetness, balance, wholeness, symmetry, radiance?

and to instruct:

Art, great art, illumines some aspect of truth in such a skillful manner that we, the perceptrs, accept its moral relation to our life a priori.

But I decided not to do that. Rather, I will try to describe the sensation of the painful in music—an admittedly subjective phenomenon that for years has haunted me.

I have always had a most passionate relationship with music. As a child in a physically and emotionally abusive family, the only place I was permitted to express frustration, anger, fear (and occasionally joy) was in piano music which I performed with surly intensity. Playing Beethoven and Mozart was considered proper, and when I won my first piano competition at age nine, it was, properly, with a Mozart sonata. Performing and hearing classical music, especially the Mozart piano concertos and sonatas, became my obsession: the last, almost-human

connection between my feelings and my intellect, without which I could never have survived past adolescence.

Even though I was only nine, I knew that there was something in this music which expressed what I was feeling, or felt that I should be feeling but did not have the skill to express otherwise. I tried to live through music (and literature) to escape the tangible pain of my own life, and often momentarily succeeded. Without continuously knowing what I was doing, I replaced human beings with art, because art was simply less painful.

Last summer one of my Mozart sonatas returned to haunt me, complete with the still unarticulated pain. This pain I associated specifically with the Adagio of the Piano Sonata in F Major (K. 332). And this is the story. In July, when a close companion unexpectedly announced that he had returned to his former partner while I was in England, I had no immediate reaction to his news; no shock, no anger, no particular thoughts or emotions at all. I had been well trained in forced stoicism. So there I sat, stone cold inside and out. He was rather taken aback, I believe, by my apparent nonchalance and quickly excited stage right. When he had gone I walked over to my piano and searched through my scores for Mozart. I found the F Major Sonata and turned to the Adagio.

I mechanically played the opening strain, the B flat major theme in my right hand and the broken chord accompaniment in my left. The theme gently ascended, then fell back. I felt intellectually satisfied to hear the familiar classical progressions, to touch the keys and produce civilized sounds. Then the Adagio turned more dramatic. The theme repeated this time in minor; later, the music burst into descending parallel thirds worthy of the most extravagantly indulgent opera duet. Contrasted with the simple, almost naive restraint of the opening, this was high drama, an apotheosis of emotion. The thirds descended; a fragment of the theme resolved; then the thirds descended again.

To my ear, this outburst was theatrical; it was not the deeper emotion I was seeking in that piece that particular night. Indeed, I discounted this momentary rapture as a mere transition, only significant because it leads us back to the original theme. And there the painful, deeper emotion began. Because the recapitulation is embodied in a structure larger than any single moment in the piece, the music becomes more than itself, hinting at emotions deeper than one person's experience. The symmetrical line and sweet sound of the music suggested an emo-

tion so hideous that never had I permitted myself to express nor to understand it until then. I could feel the shock as I began to understand my response not only to this Adagio, but to all music.

More often than we care to admit, we deny or avoid painful knowledge; we prefer a life of limited, anesthetized response. But music has no such limitations. Like all great art, music is filled with awe, plastic and constant. Our recognition of it may be almost instantaneous: It slams us in the chest and stops us flat. We do not move; we cannot move. The protective fog dissolves. We are face to face with Truth. Truth we cannot deny or avoid. Truth, not as we *think* it ought to be or *feel* that it may be, but as it is.

For this reason, the process of seeking beauty through art is dangerous: it may not show us what we expect to be shown. Art is not meant to solace or soften; it is not humane. It may even leave us without hope or dreams. And yet, not to seek beauty or truth is to deny Life. Life, the gut-wrenching stimulation of the soul: Growth is not always pleasant, but it is necessary.

At the recapitulation in the Adagio, I was alone. My sensory anesthesia dissolved. The familiar music, once my escape, now turned back to me, exhumed a buried truth, and placed it rudely in my hands. Here is your truth, the music said, that you are isolated from all other human beings, and that you are afraid of being alone.

I never did finish playing the Adagio that night, but then I had heard what I was seeking.

Sed veritati interea invigilandum est, modusque servandus, ut certa ab incertis, diem a nocte, distinguamus.*

*" . . . But meanwhile we must be vigilant for truth and keep proportion, that we may distinguish the certain from the uncertain, day from night."

—Thomas Burnet
Archaeologiae Philosophicae (1692)