

In the second chapter of his book, *Thinking About Music*, Lewis Rowell engages the reader with a series of forty-eight philosophical questions pertaining to music. These questions are exercised upon Mozart's *Menuet K. 355*, and organized into four groups; questions on the thing itself, questions of value, questions relating more to the observer, and finally, questions on the context of the piece itself. Throughout the duration of this paper, two questions will be examined from each of these groupings in hopes to grasp a greater understanding of Mozart's menuet.

Rowell begins these inquiries with the first question group being situated upon a relatively objective nature; "Questions on the thing itself". The first question examined here being #3 "Does it change? Or is it static?"(1). One might begin by arguing that the piece itself, relating to the transcription of Mozart's musical ideas is indeed static. The score illustrates and projects musical values in terms of vertical and horizontal dimensions that have been preserved to allow the piece to be readily available for future performances. Providing that reproductions of this score have been competently reproduced and disseminated over the generations, the basic irreducible minimum, being the musical language of ideas has been kept static. With this said, however, this about the furthest extent to which the piece can be considered static in nature.

As Rowell mentions, the instruments on which this menuet has been performed upon have definitely evolved and changed since Mozart's period. To further elaborate, one could also argue that essentially all other factors in terms of performance will change, even if at the very slightest with virtually every performance. This is due to the fact that every performance includes a unique musical setting of execution. At the very basic level, this musical setting includes a unique correlation of venue, instrument,

performer interpretation, and execution. Although, the average listener may not be able to immediately discern the differences between two pianists' performances of this piece, no two performances, however similar, will be identical in an absolute sense.

The second question addressed for this group is #6 "When and where does it exist?"(2). Rowell poses the question of the location of music's physical existence here. This brings forth some interesting concepts. Once the piece has been written, it clearly must exist. With this said, its existence will continue, even if it is never physically performed. To further explain, one might point out that there have been various compositions by highly-regarded composers that never happen to be played in a public performance for whatever reason. For example, a chamber work written by Beethoven that was not played until recently still had to exist to be performed approximately two centuries after the composer's death (3). Although, it is likely that this piece had been previously performed privately at some point, it would still have existed, even if it had been locked away in a safe such as Jules Verne's novel *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, which remained forgotten and undiscovered until 1989 (4).

The unperformed music example is relatively straight-forward for the existence argument, yet the concept of music only existing in the mind that Rowell mentions is somewhat more complicated, however. It could technically be argued that this is possible though. The triangular relationship of source, transmission and receiver could easily be completed entirely within the mind. This location in the mind, however, does generate another problem; mainly, its existence would contend that the piece would be essentially non-accessible to the public realm; giving an extremely limited scope of reach. Still, music existing only within one's mind, and the previous examples of music which were

never disseminated could both have equally limited accessibility.

Rowell's second group of questions pertain to the notion of value; now moving into a more subjective realm. The first question addressed here is #12, "Is it genuine?"(5). With this question posed, the concept of forgery in the arts really forces society to question where exactly a work's apparent value stems from. Perhaps the most famous example of forgery was the production of fake Vermeer paintings produced by Han van Meegeren during the first half of the twentieth century (6). If by chance, K.355 was the musical equivalent of a Vermeer forgery, the piece surely would still have some level of value, being able to replicate the compositional style of Mozart so elegantly. The key term that Rowell so crucially used, however, was whether it would have the *same* value. This is a difficult question to answer. In terms of listening, it would seem somewhat peculiar to suddenly enjoy the piece less if it was not written by Mozart. This would expose a definite bias to bestow extra credit upon a piece in the most questionable subjective manner. It is still quite probable though, that by not being a legitimate piece of the Mozart "catalog" so to speak, it would be viewed as a mere imitation of the great composer's skill. Society would likely lessen the product value without the established Mozart brand attached to it, however irrational this may seem. It is difficult to say how much this piece would be devalued, but it is probably safe to assume that it would occur to some extent.

Rowell's questions #17 and #18 are very subjective, yet also interesting. The first being "Will it do me good?"(7). Personal experience relating to the arts is often quite subjective, and it is likely that K.355 is no exception to this problem. Although Rowell stated that he generally finds menuets dainty and trivial (8), it is quite possible

that *K.355* could inspire some that encountered this piece and had a differing subjective experience. *K.355* does, by some accounts fit with Rowell's description, with its subtle exercising of counterpoint and repeated phrasing. Still, while it may leave one totally unmoved, it may bring out the most profound emotions in another. It's quite difficult to answer Rowell's questions as to if it will regulate one's brain waves or make them value the good more, and the comforting and healing aspect of music can be dictated in greatly different ways, simply by taste. One could argue though more objectively that by simply listening to this piece critically, it could indeed further one's musical education and understanding, and this is definitely true if this piece was used for a student of piano.

Perhaps Rowell's following question of potential harm is easier to address in a more objective fashion than his previous one. Upon listening, this piece exhibits a definite power in its strong chromaticism, but appears to lack any significant aspects which have been typically linked to acts of malevolence throughout recently history as it is relatively light, lacks any significant aggression, and at the same time, lacks the typical fanfare that has been used as propaganda in the past. While the intensity of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* caused a riot during its premiere, and Beethoven's triumphant *Ninth Symphony* was exploited during the Second World War by the Third Reich in Germany, this menuet has existed for centuries without any known connections to ill-intentioned acts. This is not to say that it is impossible for this piece to become corrupted by outside influences, but it seems safe to agree that the music itself is essentially harmless to the listener.

Moving on to the questions relating more to the observer, #32 asks "Must I possess any special or peculiar knowledge to assess if it is good, beautiful, or

meaningful?” (9). Unlike the serialist works of Arnold Schoenberg or Milton Babbitt, which tend to require a certain amount of background knowledge to both understand and appreciate, *K.355* is quite an easy, and pleasant piece of music to listen to. Of course, an extensive analysis of this piece would require background knowledge, but this appears to be more than the basic premise that Rowell has asked. On the basic level, this piece is very accessible, and this is a positive aspect to most. With this in mind, one need not have any esoteric or extensive background knowledge, or even preparation to assess that this piece is indeed “good”. The challenge comes more when attempting to access if this piece is beautiful, or meaningful. This piece has adequate complexity, a fine performance, and overall pleasant sound. With this said, the term “beautiful”, could also be affixed to this piece easily with a casual listening experience. Whether the piece itself is meaningful, is perhaps the most subjective and difficult question to answer of these three. It’s uncertain what exactly Mozart intended to express through this particular menuet. Perhaps its meaningfulness is drawn from the listener’s experience, which one could also acquire casually without any extensive background.

Similarly, question #33 asks what type of perception, testimony, or evidence is required to answer these questions (10). Although authority, critical reviews, as well as audience response are generally good indicators, they can all be temperamental and subject to shifts in standards. While Monteverdi was criticized during the baroque period for some of his techniques, modern critics have been much more kind to his work. If expertise is lacking, one could almost say that this process becomes more of a matter of opinion, and if this is the case, then one’s personal opinion, is as relevant to anyone else’s (if also lacking expertise).

The final selection of questions relate to the context of the piece. The first one being #37, “When Mozart lived?” (11). Although this question may not immediately seem to be crucial, it is important to explore for a number of reasons. As influential and innovative as Mozart was in the classical period, he would have still been a product of his time, influenced by the various traditions, constraints and factors of life during the eighteenth century in Europe. To understand what he did, and why he did it, it is important to examine his musical upbringing, when and where he lived, as well as what factors influenced him during his brief lifetime, and how he used all of these to become an influential composer of his time. Clearly, with music’s evolutionary process, had Mozart been born a few decades earlier or later, his creative output would have been altered by whatever differing influences he would have encountered during his life.

This leads to the final question #46, which asks the relevance of Beethoven and other later composers rejecting the menuet for the scherzo (12). Once again, it is important to appreciate just how much changes during a composer’s lifetime. As music evolves, what may seem to be a relevant form of the time may turn out to be a trend at a later date. This does not necessarily mean that the menuet is inferior to the scherzo, it simply shows that influence has evolved in a different direction. Just as when various twentieth century composers decided to abandon the structure of the common practice period for atonality, it did not discredit or lessen the greatness of previous compositions of this form, it was merely a new direction into uncharted territory.

To conclude, Rowell’s series of questions are engaging in not only the musical sense, but also the philosophical one. It appears at times that these questions lead to more

enquiries than answers. Still, the selection of questions definitely aid in examining Mozart's *K.355* from numerous angles which may not have otherwise been carried out, and is therefore an important exercise for anyone studying works by Mozart, as well as any other composer new or old.

Footnotes

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