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Mozart Quartet K. 458, "Hunt"

Painter Agnes Martin has said of her work: "If you wake up in the morning and you feel happy about nothing, no cause, that's what I paint about." It could well be said of Mozart that he, too, finds inspiration in the underlying happiness that embraces all corners of our experience, arising radiantly from clear vision. His is an ebullient joy infinitely larger than cheerfulness, although it knows cheer well. He can frolic and poke fun with the best of them, and the next moment enter fully into shadow without being consumed by it.

The String Quartet in B-flat Major, K458, starts like a nursery rhyme: four short, rhyming lines. Innocence incarnate, it eschews any complication or sophistication and, without embarrassment, launches us with high spirits into the piece. It is also this opening that earns the work its nickname, "the Hunt," evoking open-air hunting horns, redolent of fresh air and optimism. The third of the four rhyming lines is almost an exact repetition of the first, but receives the most uncomplicated of embellishments, a simple turn, born of enthusiasm, that will become a seed for much of the movement.

Immediately following the opening statement we find ourselves in the forest, a pair of lovers taunting each other, one calling out teasingly from behind a tree before jumping out and hiding again, finally pretending to disappear entirely before erupting in laughter and glee at all the hijinks. One could be in any number of the master's operas; good-natured wit abounds. After a sequential, traveling passage the music halts for each player in turn to recall, with curiosity, that turn in the opening phrase, now extended to a five-note shake. The music seems to chase after this turn until we are brought to the next theme. Here the turn is contextualized, recognized, perhaps, as the signature motion of a butterfly. And the flutter of the insect becomes indistinguishable from the frisson of delight it engenders. The opening section evaporates into the ether, drifting away, ever fainter.

Following the repeat of the music offered so far is a theme, over a drone, with the characteristic rusticity of the simplest of horns. Again we breathe the fresh air; all is health, and ease. But, as in all comedies, trouble must intrude, even if it is offered with a melodramatic wink, as it is here. The turn figure is modified to make progress up the scale rather than stay in one place, and off it goes looking from a reprieve from the veil of mist that has descended. It is punctuated by theatrical sighs, but the angst doesn't last. The butterflies in the open meadow are there to remind us of the essential lightness of life if we can

but lift our eyes. The music lets go of the drama to rediscover the opening idea.

The coda of the movement announces itself with an operatic “halt!” and a tremulous response, but the mask is dropped quickly. The opening nursery rhyme echoes through the whole countryside and overlaps itself. In the end the altered turn from the melodramatic part of the movement reappears completely debarbed, and the music dances away, guileless.

Agnes Martin says: “My formats are square, but the grids never are absolutely square; they are rectangles, a little bit off the square, making a sort of contradiction, a dissonance, though I didn’t set out to do it that way. When I cover the square with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power.” Martin and Mozart share something essential. The second movement of the quartet, the minuet, is the squarest of forms, but Mozart is too clever to allow predictability and regularity to weigh it down. The first phrase is made up of eight bars, or steps, absolutely as expected. Yet within this structure Mozart first organizes those bars not by twos, but into three plus three plus two. Because of this there is no middle to pin down and the music levitates rather than plods. Within the second part of the phrase, Mozart emphasizes the preparation or lift for each step rather than the moment at which foot meets earth, and thus gives wing to the music on a second level. Throughout the movement he defies expectations of leaden symmetry without breaking the frame. By doing this, he is able to enter into the world of high society without succumbing to the tedium of having to be of it. In the contrasting trio section he plays the clown who, in turn, plays at being a diva. There are operatic sighs, and leaps, and weeping, but all from a clown who puts it at such a remove as to be able to toss it aside and smile, as if the cares of the world were in quotation marks.

The slow movement of the piece retreats into the key of the subdominant, a benediction, the place where outer reality resolves into our private stillness. Martin wishes “the idea of time would drain out of my cells and leave me quiet even on this shore.” Here in this Adagio there is motion but not time in the sense of traveling through. Rather there is the coexistence of all things; the light and the dark that are presented sequentially only because time is the necessary substrate for music are in fact two aspects of the same state. The thematic material that breathes the cold air of shadow in minor also emanates the warmth of the sun’s rays in major. There is peace in the doubleness; the two don’t cancel each other but rather validate each other, held together in suspension. The movement has the most gentle and delicate of leave-takings.

The last movement abounds with laughter, teasing, skipping and general merriment. At times it evokes elemental game-playing as the quartet functions as two against two. It is often said of Mozart that he is childlike. Certainly here are elements we associate with child's play, at least with very clever and engaged children: a sense of wonder and of looking at our world as one replete with possibility, an essential lightness of engagement. Agnes Martin claims: "Inspiration is pervasive but not a power... It is an untroubled mind. Of course we know that an untroubled state of mind cannot last. So we say that inspiration comes and goes but really it is there all the time waiting for us to be untroubled again. We can therefore say that it is pervasive. Young children are more untroubled than adults and have many more inspirations. All the moments of inspiration added together make what we call sensibility. The development of sensibility is the most important thing for children and adults but is much more possible in children." And in those of preternatural wisdom, like Mozart.

Note by Mark Steinberg