

Mozart's Unfinished Business

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On 23 August 1782 Leopold Mozart wrote to Baroness Martha Elisabeth von Waldstätten to thank her for the part she had played in the last-minute practical arrangements for his son's wedding at the start of the month. For a thank you letter, its tone is remarkably tetchy. After quickly expressing his gratitude, Leopold complained about the backlash he was suffering as a result of his son's resignation from the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg. And, warming to his task, he let down his guard and gave a remarkably frank assessment of Wolfgang's character.

Here is the passage, with Leopold's underlining and italics. In English:

I would be quite reassured if only I had not discovered an egregious fault in my son, which is that he is far too *patient* or *sleepy*, too *comfortable*, perhaps sometimes too *proud*; and if you add all these things together they make a person *inactive*. Or he is too *impatient*, too *hot*, and cannot wait for anything. There are two opposing elements that rule in him: too much or too little, and no middle road. If he is not short of anything, he is immediately satisfied and becomes *comfortable* and *inactive*. If he must become active, then he feels his worth and *wants to make his fortune at once*. Nothing can stand in his way...

In context, it is clear that Leopold was taking about his son's lack of success in finding a salaried job. But his comments resonate with all the evidence we have about Mozart's compositional habits too. The physical traces of his composing manuscripts – paper, inks, pens, handwriting – show a fairly consistent pattern: bouts of intensive, fast writing which usually took him through to the end of a piece, but occasionally did not. If the writing process didn't exactly stall, then it could be said that the schläferlich Mozart could come to the fore, and having begun a work with the appearance of being fully engaged with it, he would lay it aside – perhaps for a few hours, a few days, or a few weeks, but sometimes for years – before returning to it and completing it. The longest gap I know of concerns the first movement of the Piano Concerto in A, K. 488: an initial burst of enthusiasm produced the first 142 bars in 1782, and the rest followed only in March 1786 when a concert in need of a new concerto was imminent.

The case of K. 488 should make us cautious about some of the assumptions that are still widely held about Mozart's creativity. The first concerns the distinction between composing music and writing it down. In his correspondence Mozart consistently used the verbs *komponieren* and *niederschreiben* to distinguish between the mental activity of composition and the performative activity of notation. But there is a long history in Mozart reception of describing this relationship between composing and writing in a more limited, but superficially more impressive, sense: that is, that Mozart only wrote out his music once it was fully formed in his head. In particular, commentators have referred to a letter of 30 December 1780, in which Mozart responded to some searching and testy questions from his father about his progress with *Idomeneo*: 'Everything has been composed, just not written down yet'. Now, I don't have access to what went on in Mozart's head, but the manuscript of K. 488 suggests to me that there are problems with the idea of a 'fully composed' piece being transferred to paper like an act of dictation. On the contrary, this and other manuscripts (including the

composing manuscript of *Idomeneo*) are riddled with small pieces of evidence that point unmistakably in one direction: that for Mozart the act of writing was an exploration of his music's potential and, paradoxically, a closing down of that potential by the fixing of details. Well, I can hear composers in the audience chuckling: isn't that just what composition is? Quite! But, given the potency of the myth, it's probably no bad thing to establish at the outset that Mozart's working methods were not abnormal, unlike the quality of the finished pieces. The second thing that the manuscript of the A-major Piano Concerto dramatises is the banal truism that all Mozart's finished pieces are ex-fragments.

I shall return to this lame observation later. But what of the fragments that remained fragments?

First, some facts and figures: we know of 155 surviving fragments by Mozart. (That is almost precisely one fragment for every four finished pieces.) Thirty-four of the fragments predate his permanent move to Vienna in 1781; 121 of them date from that final Viennese decade. Even allowing for the fact that more fragments are likely to have survived from his mature working life than from his adolescence, especially given that his widow conserved them so carefully, the chronological distribution is still strikingly unbalanced.

The obvious question to ask in each of these cases is 'Why didn't Mozart finish this piece?' and there are various answers. We know that some fragments were abandoned because a particular performance opportunity fell through, as for example with the Concerto for Piano and Violin in November 1778, and – in all likelihood – the Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola and Cello in 1779. Some fragments were cannibalised in later pieces, such as the start of the Concerto for Bass Horn in G of 1787 which became the first movement of the Clarinet Concerto in 1791. And some, particularly the very brief piano concerto fragments from 1784–6, appear to be false starts, quickly abandoned in favour of stronger ideas that immediately bore fruit in finished works: a situation that is perhaps indicative of the improvisatory approach Mozart took to the composition of concertos. In a very small number of cases, including the G minor String Quartet fragment from 1790/91, the music takes a wrong turn after a magnificent opening: but these cases are rare – they can be counted on the fingers of one and a bit hands. The cluster of fugue fragments at the start of Mozart's Vienna years is the result of his wooing Constanze Weber and the Emperor Joseph II – to different ends, of course. Both these 'significant others' in his life liked to hear Mozart improvise fugues. Fugues are easy to improvise, rather harder and certainly more tiresome to sit down and work out notationally. When Mozart's wooing achieved its goals – he married one of them and got a big commission from the other – the fugue fragments went away.

But when it comes to the many fragments of chamber music from the last five years of his life, the reason why Mozart didn't finish them is simply that he died suddenly, with lots of work in progress.

The data on this slide highlights some of the implications of that state of affairs. In the period 1787–91, there are 110 completed works in the Köchel catalogue and 54 fragments: a ratio of about 2:1. But if we set aside the small and occasional pieces – the canons, court dances, cadenzas, Handel arrangements, and the patriotic songs he wrote in wartime – then the ratio of finished to unfinished works is roughly 1:1. In all the genres listed in the table, the number of fragments is equal to or greater than the number of finished works from the same period. So to give an account of the stylistic development of Mozart's music during those years without drawing on the fragments is to

miss half the picture. These late fragments are the dark matter in Mozart's musical universe; if we want to understand how his music was changing we cannot afford to ignore them.

And his music was changing rapidly over the course of those years. It is misleading to speak of a 'late style': Mozart was not a grand old man reflecting on his maturity in a series of ripe summations like Verdi or Carter. He was a young-ish artist reaching new levels of artistic achievement. Christoph Wolff sidestepped the problem very neatly in his recent book *Mozart at the Gateway to his Fortune* by writing of a new and developing 'imperial' style from the end of the 1780s, coinciding with the first of Mozart's court appointments in Vienna.

Wolff summarises the broad characteristics of this new style as 'expansive ... [with] rich and complex textures, [a] clear-cut melodic approach, and more explicit and rigorous polyphony' [p. 179].

To which we might add a more searching approach to the harmonic space of tonal music (in particular maximally smooth hexachordal cycles), ever greater sensitivity to colour and texture, the avoidance of gestural clichés in formal punctuation (a blurring of the distinction between thematic and non-thematic materials), an ironic use of musical topics and incongruous juxtapositions of different musical styles, the exploration of new rhetorical tropes in musical form-building, and the development of new expressive codes – the most prominent of which has been described as a kind of 'expressive detachment', but which I would characterise as a new type of interplay between musical mechanisms on the one hand and the language of feeling on the other.

This is a rich set of ingredients, and – for all the high level of finish in their surfaces – the works of Mozart's 'imperial' period feel exploratory. The fragments are no exception: even in some of the shorter examples, like the breath-takingly serene 31-bar fragment of a G major Violin Sonata from 1790, Mozart was testing boundaries.

To illustrate these points I'd like to focus for the rest of this presentation on two of those late fragments of chamber music, both pieces in keys that Mozart rarely used: the sonata form exposition of a String Quintet in A minor dating from the middle of 1791, and the opening section of a String Quartet in E minor that dates from some point after the Spring of 1790.

But first a brief apologia. You are no doubt wondering what sort of monstrous ego, blind hubris and inconceivable stupidity would lead anybody to even contemplate completing these fragments. When I started this project in earnest, about four years ago, I didn't imagine that any of my completions would see the light of day in public performances; rather, I undertook them to test out some critical hypotheses about Mozart's working methods and the evolution of his style. First of all, I wanted to see what would happen: (1) if I tried to 'perform' the notation in the same way that it seems Mozart did – to write very fast and in a particularly hierarchical way; (2) if I applied a little theory I have about the causes of expressive density in Mozart's music (a characteristic that is present throughout his working life, independent of other stylistic changes); (3) if I paid as much attention as I could to the immediate stylistic and generic circumstances of the fragment and formulated a series of counter-factual thought experiments about the hypothetical circumstances of its completion; (4) if I tried to be true to the axiom that Mozart never repeats himself, by applying the *principle* of precedents, not their *letter* – that is, taking his higher-order compositional concerns and applying them to the material of the fragment, rather than 'quoting the example' of earlier pieces.

So, for me, the 70 or so completions I've made are primarily pieces of criticism and analysis, not compositions. In this respect they are rather like the wordless 'functional analyses' that the BBC producer Hans Keller made in the 1950s and 60s. You'll recall that he would arrange for performances of canonic works (including Mozart's D minor String Quartet) to be placed side-by-side with his composed demonstrations of their inner motivic coherence. Thus a purely Schoenbergian conception underpinned Keller's enterprise. If his approach was modernist through and through, then mine is perhaps a playful post-modern equivalent, toying with the openness of the fragments, not with their closed system of structural inter-relationships. If the results sound like 'micro-Imperial-style' Mozart, then hurrah! If they don't, but still cast some light on his developing style, then frankly I'm scarcely less chuffed.

Of course, I have no idea how these fragments would have sounded as completed pieces, and I'm mindful of Sir Harrison Birtwistle's deep quip that Mozart was obviously capable of setting down one development section in the morning, but if something had got in the way he would probably have written a completely different development section that same afternoon. But it is not Mozart's superfluity of invention that has emboldened me to undertake multiple completions of each fragment: they've been done to test contrasting hypotheses about the musical material and see where their assumptions might take the music over the course of the entire movement.

Right, now I've got that off my chest, let's turn to the A-minor String Quintet fragment. (There is a facsimile of the manuscript in the handout.) All the evidence points to this being the start (a 72-bar sonata-form exposition for the first movement) of a companion piece to the D major Quintet K. 593 of December 1790 and the E flat Quintet K. 614 which Mozart dated 12 April 1791. Viennese publishers issued chamber music in sets of three or six during that period, and it was customary for one of them to be in the minor mode. As Alan Tyson demonstrated in the early 1990s, this fragment is written on paper that Mozart first used in March 1791. When the other two quintets were eventually published posthumously by Hoffmeister in 1793, the title page announced that they were 'composed for a Hungarian amateur', probably the businessman Johann Tost; and we can see in the fragment many of the musical symbols associated with Hungary in late-eighteenth-century Viennese music – the chromatic twist in the first violin's opening line, the 'gypsy fiddling style' of the first climax (apologies for the political incorrectness – it's his, not mine), the emphasis on the flat supertonic in bars 10–12, the energetic leaping figure in the first violin when the dominant of C is finally reached in bar 27, perhaps even the pizzicato cello in the exposition's second paragraph. The design of the fragment's opening is complementary to those of its companion pieces. You'll recall that the D major Quintet opens with a cello solo answered by the four upper instruments; the E flat Quintet opens with the two violas answered by the other three instruments; and here it is the first violin that hogs the spotlight, answered by the lower four instruments.

The manuscript tells us much about Mozart's working methods. It is a *particella*, in which only the essential voices are notated, like mnemonics. The two words that are missing, but clearly implied, throughout this source are 'et cetera'. It is striking that when notation re-appears after one of the 'etc' gaps, Mozart frequently leaves the first note of the bar blank. I think this was a technique he learned during his work on the string quartets he dedicated to Haydn in 1785, where many revisions in the autograph manuscript were necessitated by the voice leading or register not quite matching up at pivotal moments.

So all one has to do to complete the exposition is to execute all the 'et ceteras' with as polished a technique as one can muster and as little interference as possible in realising patterns that have been already established in the score. There is a beautiful fluency to the particella, but Mozart had second thoughts about some details.

In bar 38 the little chromatic figure at the end of the bar was redistributed.

The reconfigured first violin line in bar 57 was clearly designed to sharpen the distinction between two complementary phrases.

The challenge in writing a development section and recapitulation to go with Mozart's exposition is, of course, somewhat greater. Naturally, the radical style of the two completed string quintets from 1790/91 exerts an influence, but so too must the sombre elements of *Die Zauberflöte*, *La clemenza di Tito* and, above all, the Requiem; because, had Mozart had the opportunity to return to the fragment, he would have done so with the experience of those three works under his belt. All five pieces have much to offer in terms of Mozart's evolving methods of handling bold rhetorical strokes as well as the subtleties of transparent instrumental textures, chromatic labyrinths, and rigorous contrapuntal elaboration. But at the same time, it would not do to lose sight of the fact that the A minor Quintet was designed to complement the other two quintets, not ape them.

In a moment the Kirkman Quartet and violist Toby Cook will play the second completion I made of this fragment in 2014. In the development section of this version I took two strategies that preoccupied Mozart towards the end of his life and applied them to the fragment's opening phrase. The first is stretto: imitation at increasingly short distances. You'll hear the shape of the opening theme shared between the different instruments. At first it appears in the first violin in three-bar phrases, then the first viola imitates the first violin at the distance of a bar. As the section unfolds the other violin and viola join in with imitation at the half bar, then at the quarter bar, and finally, all the instruments at the eighth bar (just a quaver apart) before the music winds down into the recapitulation. (The fact that this works at all suggests to me that Mozart may have designed the theme with this treatment in mind.) Over-layering this is the rhetorical trope of *metanoia* (literally, 'repentance') which crops up in many of Mozart's development sections from his final years. This is a mechanism that starts with a sudden harmonic twist sending the music in the 'wrong' direction at the start of the development, and a reappearance of the same gesture, now untwisted to send the music in the 'right' direction towards the closure of the development's tonal trajectory. You'll hear this in the heavy chords at the start of the development, which send the music towards B minor, and their recurrence untwisted in the direction of D minor towards the end of the section. This means that far from being a seamless continuation of Mozart's exposition, my development section starts with an outrageous harmonic swerve (as indeed do many of his development sections). In the recapitulation, discursive issues from the development section keep bubbling to the surface, in particular during the coda.

An *Allegro moderato* for String Quintet in A minor, Fragment 1791c.

[Performance]

Thank you. I'd like to turn next to the fragment of a sonata allegro in E minor which belongs to Mozart's 'Prussian' Quartet project. In a letter to his financial supporter Michael Puchberg on 12 July

1789, Mozart sketched out a series of projects that were likely to contribute to his income stream in the coming months. These included six quartets he was writing 'for the King [of Prussia]'. By the summer of 1790 he had completed three of them (K. 575, 589, 590) and had begun at least two more (this fragment and the shorter G minor fragment). But a series of more pressing projects, with the likelihood of more immediate and greater financial gain, got in the way of further progress on the quartets. Had he returned to them after having completed the Requiem in the spring of 1792, we might now talk of the *six* 'Prussian' Quartets: composed, like the six Mozart dedicated to Haydn, in two batches of three spread over three years.

As you can see in the facsimile of the manuscript, this source is also a *particella*, with precisely enough information to complete the missing textural elements, but no more. This takes me back to my lame comment that the completed pieces are *ex-fragments*. Because, time and again, Mozart's fragments seem to contain all the information needed to carry out a completion: no more and no less. And this suggests to me that each of those fragments behaves like a Baroque *inventio*, waiting to be elaborated, not a piece of 'frictionless dictation' that sprung fully formed from Mozart's musical consciousness. This is not to deny the simulation of an innovative, post-Baroque subjectivity in Mozart's music, but merely to cast a critical eye on how it got there, and to wonder if it actually emerged from a starting point that is not so far removed from Mozart's Baroque predecessors after all.

Anyway, the *inventio* of this E minor fragment is perhaps most remarkable for its cyclical juxtaposition of two contrasting types of music – pathetic gestures and brilliant concerto-like writing: an innovative pattern that seems in line with the radicalism of the completed 'Prussians'. But the exposition is not as clearly defined as in the A minor quintet fragment. The music stops at the end of the leaf with the first half of a perfect cadence in G major. Did the exposition consist of just one more bar, or did it carry on longer, with another paragraph to balance out the last sixteen bars of the fragment? If there was just one more chord, it might explain why the fragment's second leaf got separated from the first and has subsequently been lost. If that was indeed the case, then this is unusually short and pithy exposition.

With the openness of the contrasting musical styles of the fragment, and the question of how much of the exposition is missing, the hypotheticals pile up. Perhaps for this reason, I ended up making seven different completions of this fragment. If you have to be somewhere at seven-thirty you can rest easy: we are not going to hear them all, but the Kirkman Quartet will play two of them.

The first four versions I made all began with the assumption that there was a longer continuation to the exposition than just one bar. They then took a maximalist approach to the development and recapitulation, trying to work out different ways in which relationship between the pathetic and brilliant elements might evolve over the course of the movement, and perhaps not worrying enough about the fragment's aphoristic properties. One of these, version 3, was based on the premise that the pathetic music would monopolise the development section. It nods to some compositional principles from the parallel section in the B flat and F major 'Prussian' Quartets: an initial harmonic twist (without the compensatory counter-twist this time), a temporary thinning of textures, a penchant for combinatoriality, and a climax that tries to find the language of feeling *in a* contrapuntal mechanism (a paradox that seems to have charmed Mozart at the time). Once again, the shape of the development has implications for the detail of the recapitulation: its tendency to

keep falling towards the subdominant and, in particular, the way that the movement ends with a kind of pre-coda that was one of Mozart's strongest fingerprints.

Fragment of an Allegro for String Quartet in E minor, Fr 1789b, completion number 3.

[Performance]

Thank you.

In a moment the Kirkman Quartet will play us out with my seventh completion of the E minor Fragment. In the last three versions I made of this piece, I tried to take the pithiness of the fragment at face value: just one more chord at the end of the exposition, and a very stripped back style for the development section and recapitulation. This minimalist approach reached its most extreme form in version 7. The only thing I'd like to say by way of an introduction is that at its centre is a compositional device that I find attractive when it occurs in *The Magic Flute*, *La clemenza di Tito* and the Requiem: that is, the way in which Mozart took gloomy material and, with minimal reshaping but some retexturing, suddenly cast a beam of light on it. You'll hear it when it happens. Elsewhere, all is despair and defiance.

Thank you for listening to me. Here to end is the fragment of an Allegro for String Quartet in E minor, completion number 7.