BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:
Moz-art à la Haydn by Alfred Schnittke

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Abstract

One of the most important advocates of the history of music, Alfred Schnittke made the reinterpretation of the great Western musical tradition his lifetime credo. His works continuously look back at it and bring it to the present using contemporary techniques, thus giving it new shapes and meanings. Consequently, Schnittke's music is both a statement of a distant world and a symbol of the contemporary musical landscape.

This paper examines in short how Schnittke relates to his musical inheritance, as evidenced by one of his most ingenious endeavors of this kind, Moz-art à la Haydn for two violins, two small string orchestras, double bass and conductor.

Keywords: Schnittke, polystylism, Mozart, quotation, intertextuality.

The background

Perhaps more than in the case of other composers, Alfred Schnittke's music cannot be properly understood if taken out of the overall context in which it was written. Continuing the tradition whose development started with Mahler and was completed by Shostakovich, Schnittke absorbs their contrasts and dichotomies and substantially intensifies them in his works. His own words are immediately illustrative of his characteristic ambivalence:

> Although I don't have any Russian blood, I am tied to Russia, having spent all my life here. On the other hand, much of what I've written is somehow related to German music and to the logic that comes out of being German, although I did not particularly want this… Like my

> German forebears, I live in Russia, I can speak and write Russian far better than German. But I am not Russian… My Jewish half gives me no peace: I know none of the Jewish languages, but I look like a typical Jew.[1]

He enjoyed huge success in the Russia of the '70s and '80s, and subsequently performances of his works all around the world. He became one of the most important composers of post-Shostakovich Russia, and brought new perspectives to 20th-century Russian music.

Schnittke's stylistic development followed the main musical trends that defined the second half of the last century. Like so many of his peers, he showed interest in the new compositional techniques of the '60s, mainly serialism and Ligeti's preoccupations with sound. A decade later he started looking further back, analyzing the various languages and styles of the past and forging his own approach, which he coined *polystylism*: "By the polystylistic method I mean not merely the 'collage' wave in contemporary music but also more subtle ways of using elements of another's style. And here it is essential at once to distinguish two different principles: the principle of quotation and the principle of allusion."[2] Schnittke's paper *Polystilistische Tendenzen in der zeitgenössischen Musik*, presented at a conference in Moscow in 1971, highlights some of his most important thoughts on the matter. Old musical materials are best brought to attention when they are quoted, alluded to, or processed, in an unceasing and multi-layered dialogue with the past.[3]

This is the key to decipher works such as his Symphony No. 1, in which one can hear quotations from Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Johann Strauss II and Chopin, but also allusions to Mahler and Ives, and Concerto Grosso No. 1, with its allusions to Corelli, fragments

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[1] Alfred Schnittke, *A Schnittke Reader*, ed. by Alexander Ivashkin, trans. by John Goodliffe, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002, p. xiii.
[2] *Ibidem*, p. 87.
[3] See Wolfgang Gratzer, "Postmoderne" überall? Aktuelle (In-)Fragestellungen im Blick auf sowjetische Musik nach 1954, in Wiederaneignung und Neubestimmung der Fall "Postmoderne" in der Musik, Hgsb. von Otto Kolleritsch, Wien-Graz, Universal Edition, 1993, p. 72.

from Schnittke's own film music, and a tango his grandmother used to play on the harpsichord. Schnittke was also one of the most prolific Soviet composers of film music, being credited for the soundtracks of over sixty-five movies, and he frequently recycled ideas from these soundtracks for his works of "serious" music: "One of my life's goals is to overcome the gap between 'E' (*Ernstmusik*, serious music) and 'U' (*Unterhaltung*, music for entertainment), even if I break my neck in doing so!"[4]

Schnittke noticed something essential, namely the existence *avant la lettre* of polystylistic attitudes manifested as various influences which shape composers' specific languages

> The polystylistic tendency has always existed in concealed form in music, and continues to exist, because music that is stylistically sterile would be dead. […] Even without making direct quotations, a composer often plans a polystylistic effect in advance, whether it be the shock effect of a clashing collage of music from different times, a flexible glide through phrases of musical history, or the use of allusions so subtle that they seem accidental."[5]

This is how he boldly juxtaposes waltzes, polkas and tangos with passacaglias, fugues and sonatas. Despite this variety of forms, the listener never experiences the feeling of chaos, because Schnittke always subordinates the contrasts to the consistency of his writing.

The source

According to his catalogue of works, Mozart's interest in dance, ballet and pantomime was quite discreet, which seems paradoxical considering that it is well documented in his letters how much he enjoyed dancing at home, at public balls, and at carnival pantomimes. But since the best days of French and Italian ballet were long gone, and these types of works depended on occasions and commissions more than others, one can perhaps understand why Mozart composed only a few of this kind. Completed examples include the ballet music for *Les petits riens* (by Jean-Georges Noverre) and the ballet music in *Idomeneo*. Among his surviving sketches and fragments there is also

[4] Alfred Schnittke, *Op. cit.*, p. xiv.
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 89.

Music to a Pantomime. In the preface to the section "Pantomimes and Ballets" of *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe*, we learn that this fragment gave Mozart scholars yet further proof of his personal appetite for dance, comedy and masquerade. In a letter dated 15th February 1783, when Mozart was already in Vienna, he wrote to his father: "I think that during the last carnival days we shall collect a company of masqueraders and perform a small pantomime. But please do not betray us."[6]

On 12 March, he gave his father a detailed account of those days:

> On Carnival Monday our company of masqueraders went to the Redoute, where we performed a pantomime which exactly filled the half hour when there is a pause in the dancing. My sister-in-law was Columbine, I Harlequin, my brother-in-law Pierrot, an old dancing master (Merk) Pantaloon, and a painter (Grassi) the doctor. But the plot and the music of the pantomime were mine. Merk, the dancing master, was so kind as to coach us, and I must say that we played it charmingly. I am enclosing the programme which was distributed to the company by a mask [ed figure], dressed as a local postman. The verses, although only doggerel, might have been done better. I had nothing to do with them. Müller, the actor, dashed them off.[7]

The surviving fragment shows the violin part of a sketch and also a final, much more extended version of it. Obviously, we cannot have a complete image of how the original pantomime looked, but we do have a completed, orchestrated version of the pantomime courtesy of German musicologist Franz Beyer, known for his restoration efforts on some unfinished Mozart works including his *Requiem*.

The music

Schnittke composed *Moz-art à la Haydn* as a result of his close partnership with violinist Gidon Kremer, whom he met, according to the latter, around 1970. On hearing Schnittke's music, Kremer immediately became an ardent admirer and collaborator. One of the

[6] Emily Anderson (ed.), *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, 3rd edition, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1997, p. 840.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 842.

many intersections of their careers led to Kremer commissioning *Moz-art* for a New Year's concert. Historical references to this opus can be confusing and difficult to put together given the contradictory information on offer, and there are even instances of authors contradicting themselves. For example, Alexander Ivashkin, Schnittke's close friend and biographer, puts both 1975 and 1976 as the year of the world premiere (in *Alfred Schnittke* and *A Schnittke Reader* respectively). Schnittke himself, in his published conversations with Ivashkin, cannot decide whether it was 1976 or 1977, while Kremer, interviewed by Ivashkin in 1989, says 1976. However, since we know that it was 1976 when Kremer asked Schnittke to write a version for two violins, logic tells us that the premiere of the original work took place on 31st December 1975.

The music exists in five versions. The instrumentation of the first requires fourteen players, presumably those available at the time of the premiere. The second violin duo version followed in 1976, the third was written for six instruments in 1980, and two more were added by Schnittke of his own volition: *Moz-art à la Haydn for two violins, two small string orchestras, double bass and conductor* (1977) and *Moz-art à la Mozart* (1990). Of all the versions, *Moz-art à la Haydn* is the most frequently performed and therefore the most popular. Its premiere took place on 30th December 1983, with the Georgian Chamber Orchestra and conductor Liana Isakadze.

The points of connection between Mozart's pantomime fragment and Schnittke's work are substantial. First, Mozart's musical material is almost exclusively the foundation for Schnittke's; second, Schnittke gives a series of stage directions, as we assume Mozart did: *Moz-art*, which lasts for about twelve minutes, requires the entrance of players one at a time, the switching of their places while the music unfolds, and their exiting as they entered, one at a time, leaving the conductor alone on stage conducting even after the music has stopped (much in the same way as Haydn's *Farewell Symphony*, hence the title; this is also something Schnittke had already experimented with in his first symphony). Furthermore, Schnittke is not only the composer and director in this piece, but also the lightning designer: he instructs that the players start the music in total darkness, then the

lights must be switched on suddenly and at the end dimmed as the musicians go off the stage.

But why did Schnittke turn to Mozart as his source of inspiration? The Classical composer's universality explains the considerable popularity his music enjoyed in Soviet Russia. Addressing not the individual, but wide audiences, Mozart appeared to fit the principles of socialist realism perfectly (the book on Mozart written by Georgy Chicherin supports this claim, Chicherin being the first People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and an important member of the Communist Party whose opinions undoubtedly influenced the socialist doctrine). It would be tempting to see this as the reason why Schnittke chose Mozart, the former being a composer whose experience with the Soviet rules repeated that of Shostakovich. But it was much more than that: for Schnittke, Mozart was a rare case of absolute purity. In a review to a piano recital, published in 1974, Schnittke noted: "Liubimov thus plays Mozart not as preserved in the eighteenth century but as alive today, as coming through the history of music and making it fertile."[8] This is a key phrase, showing how Schnittke thought of, and related to, the Viennese master when he composed *Moz-art*. He didn't see Mozart's music as being captive in the century in which it was written, but as a vehicle travelling to modern times.

In the introduction of the piece (up to rehearsal number 3[9]), Schnittke introduces a few themes from Mozart's pantomime, but the Classical composer's presence, both literally and figuratively, becomes properly evident once the solo violin plays fragments from scene no. 6 of the pantomime, the moment Harlequin enters the stage. We already know that Mozart himself played this character in 1783, which is why Schnittke's intention becomes very clear (in Mozart's score, this scene is the most extended and is conceived in theme and variation form; Mozart evidently allowing himself enough space for improvisation). Nevertheless, this passage is rather ambiguous from a stylistic standpoint: Schnittke takes several contrasting Mozartian motives, altering their sonority through techniques such as *sul*

[8] Alfred Schnittke, *Op. cit*, p. 81.
[9] Musikverlag Hans Sikorski 1935.

ponticello, *pizzicato* and *flageolet,* and obsessively repeats them without an attempt to "marry" them, the contrast itself becoming a feature. There is a certain aleatoricism which gives new meanings to the original Mozartian quotations, placing them in the context of Schnittke's contemporary musical language. Reinterpretation dominates the entire work, and generates a fluctuation between pseudo-Classical sonorities and sharp polytonal dissonances. The chronological perspective thus created by the overlapping and combining of Mozartian quotations has the same effect as the old dressed in a new outfit.

The work continues with the succession of eleven sections, differentiated by changes in tempo, tonality and thematic material. The dominant writing technique is *stretto*, as in most of Schnittke's compositions, and the basic melodic components are rhythmically augmented and diminished, as well as transposed. When voices from the tonal themes are independently transposed, the resulting dissonances can tend towards atonality but, as with Ligeti and Nono, the themes always remain recognisable. The most relevant example of this can be found in the tenth section, where Schnittke combines no less than five Mozartian themes, thus weaving a counterpoint which is heterogenous, dense, and polytonal, but which never loses its coherence. What seems to be lost, though, is the Mozartian character, which seems odd considering that it occurs at the very culmination of the development of Mozart's original themes.

The themes that Schnittke borrowed don't seem to have been chosen with the intention of respecting the dramaturgy of the original pantomime. Rather, Schnittke may have been interested in how they could be exploited and blended, favouring one over the other. A certain moment in the piece draws the attention to the disguised message it appears to carry: in the fifth section (rehearsal number 23), Schnittke works on thematic material from the sixth scene of the pantomime. Here, Columbine is sad, Pierrot tells her to sit at the table, but she eventually leaves. Then Pierrot sits down and falls asleep. The melancholic mood of the infatuated maid finds musical expression in a D minor *adagio* theme, to which Schnittke adds a bit of irony, marking it *lamentoso*. In the Mozartian manuscript, this moment is followed by Harlequin's entrance (cf. the opening of *Moz-art*).

Schnittke juxtaposes the two themes that differ both in tonality (D minor versus B-flat major) and in character. This heavy collision leads to the rhythmic and melodic disintegration of the themes, and also creates an instance of the persiflage Schnittke's great contemporary, Shostakovich, was so well known for. We don't know who Schnittke is laughing at here, but he is laughing out loud.

It is hard to say what made Schnittke turn to this incomplete Mozart work. It is probably its very diverse, stylistic nature: the sharp contrasts in style between the thirteen surviving scenes (of the original fifteen) are reminiscent of Schnittke's own theorised and practised polystylism. Moreover, it is possible that he was drawn to it due to its *commedia dell'arte* features: its character stereotypes and improvisation, which probably also explains why, at the world premiere, Gidon Kremer and the other players performed the piece with masks.

Schnittke mingles, develops and comments on Mozart's themes in a fragmentary approach, allowing the listener to imagine if and how else they could be enriched. This intertextuality shows, once more, that the borders of music are never rigid, but are part of a complex network of references to other music. The musical texts "speak" to each other. Once we read Schnittke's interviews with Ivashkin and we learn about his belief that "things return and then go away again"[10] and that "life proceeds endlessly in a circle"[11] a door opens, allowing us to perceive the work differently. We become tempted to read it backwards: what if we completely ignored the chronology and looked at Mozart's music through Schnittke's and not the other way around? It may have very well been Schnittke's intention to make us hear the Viennese master through his ears, understanding a work written almost two hundred years ago through the grammatical laws of 20th century musical language. It is from this perspective that Schnittke is a paradigm of contemporary music, his huge popularity is due to the bridges he built between the most diverse musics put in the eclectic ambience of his time. A sort of wolf dressed as a sheep, according to

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 26.
[11] *Ibidem*.

Taruskin. A sort of socialist realism without the socialism, proposes Ivashkin.

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