Baroque Practice

Mozart as Early Music?

by Ginna Watson

By now, many string players know about Baroque music played on historic instruments, often called "early music." And many historically-informed performance practices have been incorporated into "modern" performances of Bach, Handel and Vivaldi: a dance-like pulse with lots of articulation in phrasing, and vibrato used as an expressive element, not a constant.

But fewer people think of Mozart and Haydn as early music. Many performances of Classical-era music are still heavily influenced by Romantic style, resulting in long spun-out melodic phrases that don't relate much to their underlying harmonies. Played this way, Classical-era music can admittedly be beautiful; but beautiful can get boring. Thinking instead of Mozart and Haydn as emerging from the Baroque era is more useful in understanding how these composers actually heard their own music.

Mozart loved creating expressive, singing melodic lines, as evidenced by the many gorgeous arias he wrote for his operas. But he also loved words: his hilarious "Pa-pa-ge-no" aria from the *Magic Flute*, for example, incorporates the rhythm of the text into the music. Like his vocal music, Mozart's instrumental music has rhetorical qualities as well. You can discover this by making up words to any of his concertos, string quartets, or symphonies, instantly creating melodic lines that are interesting, speech-like, and actually more expressive than an unvarying endless melody. (An obvious one to try this technique on is *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*; less obvious, but very effective, is the opening movement of *Symphony No. 40*.)

Thinking of Mozart's style as "musical speech" isn't unusual if you think about where it came from: Mozart studied with Bach's youngest son, Johann Christian. J.C. Bach is known as the "London" Bach because he studied in England with Handel; he was said to admire the way Handel set the texts of his oratorios—such as *The Messiah*—to music.

Similarly, Haydn studied the works of Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, who used the new "Sturm und Drang" (storm and stress) style to create dramatic and rhetorically-influenced works. Haydn adopted C.P.E.'s elements of surprise in his own music, adding unexpected sforzandos and pianissimos. And Haydn loved jokes, wasting no opportunity to poke fun at the audience's musical expectations. From adding extra beats and rustic touches to his elegant dance movements to actually calling for performers to get up and walk off the stage during his *Farewell Symphony* (a not-so-subtle hint to his employer, Prince Esterhaszy, to let his musicians go home for the summer), he added "texture" and articulation to his music.

That texture, an important part of his style, is completely submerged in performances that smooth out the melodic and harmonic lines in a Romantic fashion. And that literally takes the fun out of Haydn's music! Present-day performances actually need to emphasize Haydn's musical jokes even more, in order to clue in contemporary audiences who might not realize that the composer was often writing with tongue in cheek.

Both Mozart and Haydn studied Baroque counterpoint, an approach to music theory in which composers created a melody and accompanying bass line simultaneously—"note against note." In this compositional style, the melody and harmony are equally important; the melody literally can't live without its harmonic counterpart. In Baroque music, this symbiosis eventually came to apply to all the inner parts of the music as well, so that that each part functioned as a melodic line—but always tied to the bass line, which provided the harmonic contour of the piece.

Classical composers set out to simplify this musical style, protesting that the polyphonic texture of Baroque music had gotten too complex. So in Haydn and Mozart you might see only a single melodic line at any given time, often played by the first violin. The inner parts—the second violin and viola, and even the cello—frequently play repeated eighth notes. This gives the melody a beautiful "cushion" to rest upon as it soars along above everyone else, one of the hallmarks of the Classical sound.

But keeping in mind that Mozart and Haydn were well-versed in their counterpoint, and could write a fugue as well as Bach, we realize that their melodies always came out of the underlying harmonies, even if they lacked a Baroque-style moving bass line. Studying this relationship can provide clues for how to play a melody: is there a dissonance beneath it? Then perhaps it shouldn't be so pretty. Is it part of a tonic chord? Then less vibrato can be used, to emphasize the calm purity of the harmonic "home base." Melodic players can experiment with endless nuances of sound to reflect the changing harmonic landscape going on around them.

Rhetoric, musical jokes, harmonic counterpoint—Haydn and Mozart had these sounds in their heads when they wrote their music. They're both more than just "pretty melodies," as beautiful as those can be. So whether you're playing the adagio from Haydn's *C Major Cello Concerto* or the "Elvira Madigan" theme from Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 21*, be sure to put on your HIP (historically-informed performance) clothes!

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