

# ***With Mozart at the Piano***

PIANO Magazine Jan/Feb 1999

*Q. What are the main determinants of tempo in Mozart?*

KUERTI. Well we have it from Mozart himself, in a letter to his father: "All my Adagios are really Andantes." And I certainly agree that there's a general tendency to play Mozart too slowly, especially the slow movements. Even something as profound as the F sharp minor slow movement of the A Major Concerto, K. 488 still has a whiff of the Siciliano rhythm and must flow without stalling. And in some of the fast movements there's a pure delight in virtuosity that ought not to be tempered by our quite proper veneration of the composer. In some ways he was saintly, but he was also human, full of mischief and humour. The finales of concerti like K. 271, K. 459, K. 466, and K. 488 easily sound labored if they're played too sedately – they need to fly and soar, of course without turning them into out and out virtuoso showpieces. The finale of the C Major Concerto, K. 503 is often played too slowly because of its Allegretto marking, which, however, is apparently not from Mozart. From its character I am convinced it's an Allegro or Vivace.

*Q. Mozart's music seems to be an almost continuous interweaving of cause and effect, of consequence as opposed to mere sequence, which is what characterizes the sonatas of lesser composers.*

KUERTI. I too find almost everything by Mozart has an element of the operatic in it. One could easily imagine scenarios to accompany the dramatic Allegro of the C minor Fantasy K. 475, the passionate cantabile aria of the second episode in the rondo of the Concerto K. 503, the buffo episode in the last movement of the B flat Sonata K. 570, or the bustling excitement, interrupted by the plaintively sweet cantabile episode in A flat Major, of the finale of the Concerto K. 271, to name just a few. However, what is especially fascinating is how he's able to keep the cantilena quality of the melodic lines in the piano writing, still sounding vocal and singable, while using leaps, rhythms and articulations that would in fact be impossible to sing. For example, the slow movement of the A minor Sonata or of the C Major Concerto, K. 467.

*Q. What is the role, to the extent and the effect of embellishment in Mozart? And how much of this is up to the performer?*

KUERTI. But circumstances alter cases. There are certain passages in the concerti which obviously require embellishment, where an outline in long notes is given that can't possibly be meant as the finished line, and couldn't be heard over the orchestra even on modern pianos, but I can't think of any passages in the sonata which require such supplementation. In the chamber music there are fermatas where a discreet transitional passage can add a really nice personal touch. I'm not against minor alterations, such as rolling the occasional chord to prevent it sounding too ponderous and chunky, or adding an occasional turn or trill, but going beyond this usually sounds to me mannered and contrived. While

it's fun to tamper and add one's own fingerprint, it's more likely to disturb than to enhance the purity of spirit that is so prevalent in Mozart.

*Q. What are the main characteristics of Mozart's cadenzas, and what determines the style (and length) of your own?*

KUERTI. It's hard to deny that, with a few splendid exceptions like those to the last movements of K. 459 and 595, Mozart's own cadenzas are relatively disappointing, compared to the inspired and sophisticated perfection of the concerti. A few scales, arpeggios and a fragment or two of a motive, as for example in the cadenza to K. 488, hardly seem enough to provide a scintillating highpoint to the movement. Perhaps that criterion is a false one, viewed from the perspective of 19<sup>th</sup>-century concerti, and Mozart viewed the cadenza as a short trifle to be improvised. Judging from the fact that he abstained from writing cadenzas to many of his concerti, one might guess that some of those he did write were quickly dashed off for a student, and do not represent what he would have improvised at his own performances. Or perhaps he wanted to keep his more glorious cadenzas secret, reserved for his own use? But for those of us, including myself, who don't have the talent or the nerve to improvise a cadenza, I want to have cadenzas that somehow match the scale and importance of the work itself. But in most (but not all) cases I am loathe to impose my own cadenza if Mozart has written one.

I have, though, written cadenzas to many of the Concerti; I always stay within the five octave compass of Mozart's pianos, and in principle I like to stay strictly within Mozart's style, but I often get carried away and they end up sounding more like Beethoven (though I think not as far out of style as Beethoven's own cadenza to the D minor Concerto). So my cadenzas are usually a little too long (but not over three minutes), modulate a little too far from the tonic, and try to be too clever – I can't resist trying to compete with Mozart (absurd as that sounds), emulating his most daring harmonic gambits, his most imaginative figurations and his most poignant and dramatic moments, so that the cadenza does become a highpoint of the movement. I find it quite challenging, and indeed thrilling, to be able to collaborate with the composer in this way, although he very possibly would not be as thrilled by the results. Serves him right for not having written them himself!

*Q. History apart, what can the fortepiano offer the Mozartian that the pianoforte can't?*

KUERTI. One can certainly learn some important things about balance, especially in chamber music, colour and especially pedaling. Pedalling in Mozart's time was very different from today. It wasn't until the 1790's, I believe, that knee-levers for lifting the dampers appeared. Viennese pianos prior to 1790, in particular Mozart's, had draw-stops, like organ stops, that lift the dampers, which could thus only be used for whole sections at a time. Some people believe that the 'normal' position for the dampers may have been up, in order to give the rather weak instruments resonance, allowing the strings to continue to resonate

as on a harp. Of course the instruments did not sustain nearly as well as modern instruments, but still the notes would glisten and mingle slightly with other notes in the passage. In any case, whether historically justified or not, I like to use flutter pedaling, especially for runs in the top octave, to allow them to shine and avoid their sounding dry and mechanical. However, I would rather be operated on by surgical instruments of the 18<sup>th</sup> century than to have to perform on an 18<sup>th</sup> century instrument. While not everything gets better over time, the piano is one thing that has improved immeasurably. The old instruments were designed for the home, not a concert hall, and really can't project enough sound, except to a microphone – and then they usually sound as though each note were from a different font. We know that Beethoven was totally dissatisfied with his pianos, even to the point of assaulting one of them with a bootjack.