

MUSIC TEACHERS.CO.UK
...the internet service for practical musicians.

Commentary on Mozart's piano
concerto in B flat K595

John Reid

© 2002 MusicTeachers.co.uk

Mozart Piano Concerto in B flat, K 595
John Reid

Although Mozart aided the development of every genre in which he composed, it was with opera and the concerto for which he reserved his most personal utterances. Indeed, his operatic instincts served him well in his experimentation with the possibilities of dramatic contrast and characterisation in the realm of the concerto, and each of the 'mature' works for soloist and orchestra inhabit particular dramatic worlds. K.595 has often been described as 'autumnal': indeed, Eric Blom has detected a 'valedictory note'. On purely musical grounds, this is perhaps explained by the fact that the B flat Concerto exploits the traditional ingredients of the genre, virtuosity among them, far less than its predecessors. This makes the work a perfect vehicle for analysis. On the one hand, the refined textures of the piece lay the musical logic comparatively bare. On the other hand, Mozart creates his drama from more subtle parameters and relationships, and it is these which will be explored during the following analysis.

In many respects, the first movement follows the conventional path of a sonata form prototype, as adapted to the necessities of the concerto genre. There is the usual 'double exposition', in which the greater part of the melodic material is presented in the tonic, by the orchestra alone, before the soloist begins. At the other end of the movement, the recapitulation is extended (from bar 329) to prepare for the cadenza, after which the orchestra concludes the piece. Within this framework, however, Mozart presents and develops his thematic material with a virtually unprecedented degree of complex integration. The orchestral exposition contains at least seven different ideas, some of which are highly thematic, others of which are simply melodic 'germs', ripe for development. However, it is often difficult to separate the individual elements or say where they begin or end. For example, the first theme in the strings is punctuated by a contrasting 'fanfare'-like gesture in the woodwind at bars 5 and 9. At bar 13, this idea is taken on by the strings, treated in imitation with the wind and brought to a close on a firm perfect cadence at bar 16. This is clearly the end of the first musical 'paragraph', during which two contrasting ideas have been presented, integrated and then extended.

This thematic 'seamlessness' is heightened by the fact that much of the melodic material is related. For example, the first theme is based on the rising triad. The second 'extended' theme, beginning at bar 29 is also lyrical in character, but makes a feature of the falling scale. Both ideas are balanced within themselves, but they also compliment each other.

How does this strong thematic integration relate to our understanding of Mozart's employment of the sonata form model in this movement? Firstly, the division between first and second subject groups is blurred. From bar 99 onwards there is a strong move towards the dominant (F major), although it remains unclear which theme initiates the new section: is it the rather short-winded theme at bar 123 or is the second subject delayed until bar 136? Indeed, this movement provides a good example of why it is dangerous to relate first and second subject groups to theme alone: key (i.e. a move to the dominant) is a far more important factor.

Secondly, Mozart re-orders much of his material, heard initially in the orchestral introduction, once the piano has entered. The melodic 'cells' are now used to provide interjections, both to dramatise the relationship between soloist and orchestra, and to provide a sense of unity within a discourse which could easily degenerate into virtuoso rambling. This specific employment of material to punctuate the argument

recalls the Baroque *ritornello* technique and is used both to help maintain tautness of structure whilst enabling flexibility within these formal boundaries.

Mozart's subtle manipulation of theme and structure complements the dynamic he develops between soloist and orchestra. His concertos have often been described as 'extended chamber music' a description which fits K.595 better than most in that the piano is more of a leading character rather than an opponent of the orchestra (a concept that originated with Beethoven). Although there is little overt virtuosity, there is nonetheless a distinct sense of 'dialogue' between piano and orchestra, due not least to the orchestral '*ritornello*' - interjections, outlined above. The 'chamber' aspect of the writing is emphasised particularly in the development section, where the woodwind join the piano virtually as 'equal' soloists. Indeed, the orchestration of this section is remarkable for its colour and subtlety. For example, in bars 157 and 319, the winds check the impulsive, rising sequence in the piano and strings with a series of soft chords — an incredible example of dramatic contrast in every sense.

Another 'dramatic' feature of the concerto lies with its harmonic language. Specifically the way in which Mozart uses chromaticism. In the very first bars of the movement, the 'foreign' notes (B natural and C sharp) in the melody, played by the 1st violins, add expressive colour to the tonic, set up carefully by the lower strings in bar 1. This kind of touch endows the piece with its particular brand of poignant lyricism (see also bars 17 and 124), but the larger tonal design is hardly threatened. However, chromaticism is also employed on a larger scale. In the second exposition, the tonic is soon undermined by the use of B natural, anticipating the dominant a considerable time before that key centre is reached. When the piano first enters, B is simply used as a decorative note (as it is in bar 3), but by the time the transition to the dominant is underway (bar 115), it is already a familiar note and plays a crucial part in preparing us for the subsequent passage in F *minor*. So, when the dominant major is reached in the exposition, it is after considerable chromaticism and harmonic ambiguity in this brief excursion into the dominant minor.

In fact, the most distinctive feature of the movement in harmonic terms is the flexible interaction between major and minor (modal mixture). Perhaps the most striking example of this is contained in the second subject theme (first heard at bar 29 and then at 136 and 299). To take the second statement: in bar 136, the strings introduce the 'falling' theme, a major scale coloured at the half-close by a diminished 7th. When the piano answers this, though it is with a scale which vacillates between major and harmonic minor, beneath which the left hand follows a descending chromatic pattern. In bar 140, the A natural at the top of the leap in the right hand clashes with the A flat in the left hand, the most extreme moment in a passage which creates a considerable harmonic *frisson*. The first movement is pervaded by such touches, which usually centre round Mozart's employment of the diminished 7th and the Neapolitan 6th, the most expressive devices known to composers of the late eighteenth century. The diminished 7th is a particularly interesting case in point as it is intrinsically ambiguous and 'open' harmonically, and can be used as a 'pivot' for rapid and unexpected harmonic shifts. This is best seen at the beginning of the development section. Here, dissonance is used to propel the music on into unexplored tonal centres, rather than as a means of simply colouring a phrase. In bar 47, the sequence of four chords (of which two are diminished 7ths) is used simply as a dramatic device the tonic being reached in the next few bars. However, in bar 179, these same chords retreat into silence, and the last chord (a diminished 7th) provides a pivot for the next phrase. In bar 182, the last of these interjections, the upper strings move on to what is effectively a dominant 7th of C major, before reaching B minor, the remotest possible key from B flat.

This introduces the emotional heart of the movement, in which the levels of dissonance and the concentration of ideas are at their most intense. Correspondingly, the harmonic and

melodic 'issues' raised in the exposition are developed further, as is often the case in an archetypal sonata form development section. For example, the 'fanfare' motif is encountered again after the initial B minor statement of the first theme, but instead of stabilising the tonal centre (as in bar 5), it moves the harmony on, via another diminished 7th towards E minor. The piano re-enters in C major, however, and the harmony subsequently shifts to C minor and then B flat major and minor. Modal mixture, used in the exposition and recapitulation, becomes the mainstay of the development. These harmonic extremities are pronounced, as Mozart leaves the listener with only the bare essentials of material, while using the orchestra (dominated at this point by the woodwind soloists) as economically as possible.

K595 is a work which demonstrates Mozart's late style at its most concentrated and concise. It contains an abundance of thematic material, which is treated and developed with the utmost control. The first movement certainly shows a mind preoccupied with the possibilities of contrapuntal writing and orchestral colour. Whether Mozart knew that this would be his last work for piano and orchestra or not, it stands as an appropriate summation to a genre which he made very much his own.

Recommended further reading:

H.C. Robbins Landon (Ed.) *The Mozart Companion*, Greenwood Press, Connecticut 1981