

Mozart's "Minuet No. 6 for Piano, in D Major"

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The genius of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791) is evident in all of his works, including his minuets for solo piano. Mozart's "Minuet No. 6 for Piano, in D Major"¹ is no exception. A studied approach to philosophical inquiry can reveal much about the piece beyond the music itself.

It would be helpful to understand what a minuet is before analyzing the piece. According to The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, a minuet is "a piece of music for a slow, stately dance in triple meter" that was popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1226). Minuet is the English spelling for what was originally the French *menuet*. It is formed from the roots *menu* for small, and *et* which referred to small dance steps.

Lewis Rowell presented four major categories by which to discuss philosophical questions that help us understand music at the broadest level. The first category is *Questions on the thing itself*. One question to ponder in this category is *When and where does the piece exist?* Mozart's "Minuet' No. 6 for Piano, in D Major" exists when it is played, and it also exists when it isn't being played. When it is being played, it exists in the present moment for the listener. As biological organisms alive in a linear world, the present is all we ever really have, so no one can argue against the piece existing when it is being played. It can also exist in the past, as memory. It can also exist in the future, for those who haven't yet heard it, or in the form of anticipation and expectation for those who have heard it. The existence of Mozart's piece in the past or in the future is a function of its performance in a present moment. It would not exist at all had it not been for present moments during which it had its conception. Once it has been played, it is "out

¹ This song is referenced as K355. In 1862, Ludwig von Köchel created a cataloging system for Mozart's compositions with the attempt to list them in chronological order.

there” in the ether. Metaphysical descriptions may be beyond the purview of this paper, but would be relevant in giving a “yes” answer to the question about whether or not the piece would exist if all recordings were lost and if no one living could remember it.

Mozart’s “Minuet No. 6 for Piano, in D Major” exists not only on recordings that are appreciated by our aural sense, but exists on paper in the form of written notation that is accessible by our visual sense. This is surely a sufficient means by which to preserve it. The same piece played over time, and by different keyboard instruments, will sound differently, so will assume subtly different forms over time.

A second question in this category of philosophical questions is *What (or who) caused it?* Aristotle wrote about four types of causes—material, formal, efficient and final (Rowell 13). Originally, the *material* cause was presumably that Mozart used pen and ink to write the song on paper. He may or may not have used his keyboard in the process of composing it, but he certainly used it to confirm the composition. The piece would have sounded differently if composed for a harpsichord, so the piano itself, as the tool of the artist, was significant. A description of the *formal* cause would include its being a minuet as previously defined, and composed in the D major scale. The *efficient* cause was that Mozart actually did compose it the way he did. He could have chosen different notes, but he selectively chose the notes that he did, and it stands as-is over time as a result. The *final* cause is not as easy to ascertain. We don’t necessarily know what motivated Mozart to compose it, whether as a commissioned work or as a creative challenge. He was, of course, more than a musician—he was a composer. A composer composes, just as an athlete trains and an investor invests. He may have felt inspiration from God. Mozart did have strong faith in God throughout his life, and he believed that his creativity was influenced by God. He wrote to his father on February 7, 1778, “I am a composer... and I

neither can nor ought to bury the talent for composition with which God in his goodness has so richly endowed me” (Davies 71).

The second major category of philosophical questioning is that of *Questions of value*. One of the several questions to consider in this category would be *Is it good?* “Good” may be considered objective when formal conventions are used for its analysis. But good can also be subjective, depending on the background, musical training, and sophistication of the listener. Mozart’s “Minuet No. 6 for Piano, in D Major” is good. It is quite good. In fact, it is very good. More accurately, it is exceptionally good. The point is that there are obviously many shades and values of “good” on the spectrum of goodness. It is good because it was played well upon first listening. It is good because it is representative of minuets, yet is creative enough (e.g., with chromatics) to sound uniquely different from other minuets.

A second question to consider as a *Question of value* is *Does it express anything?* Whether music expresses emotion or whether we glean emotional content from music is immaterial; both are two parts of one whole, the dyad between object and observer. Mozart’s “Minuet No. 6 for Piano, in D Major” is expressive, and one can imagine what scenes would be playing on the screen if it were part of a sound track for a film scene, especially an old silent movie where the characters tended to be overly expressive. It starts off pleasantly, almost like an introduction to a short story. Single notes make one pause with uncertainty before a little pattern develops that continues with confidence. The single notes and two-note chords imply a sense of yearning or questioning. There are several of these back-and-forth periods of uncertainty and glimpses of confidence before a more playful and energetic section arrives. It is as if someone were pondering what to do, imagining several possible courses of action, and then finally deciding upon and acting on one of those.

Questions relating more to the observer is the third major division of philosophical questions that Rowell noted. *Can I think music?* is a question from that category. One can certainly think *about* music, especially in an analytical manner. Music can be talked about in a descriptive manner, and ideas about music can be shared with others. We can also *think* music. Whereas thinking analytically *about* music is done so within the verbal context of our language, music itself exists in its own realm, one that is transcendent of language. Almost anyone can remember and hum a simple melody, albeit not necessarily in tune. Musicians can remember music, be totally still and silent, and can mentally *hear* songs in tune and in key. Mozart's "Minuet No. 6 for Piano, in D Major" is currently coursing through consciousness as this sentence is being constructed, despite the external room being totally silent.

A second question to ponder in Rowell's third category of philosophical questions is *What prior assumptions have I made that direct and constrain my thinking?* It must be difficult for some people to think about Mozart without picturing actor Tom Hulce portraying him in the film, "Amadeus." Seeing a painting of the actual Mozart is helpful but it is difficult to overcome the tendency to remember the physical motion and bubbly personality created by the actor in the movie. Also, anyone knowing what a minuet is will know that it was a lively little dance in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, and that preconception can color their impression of Mozart's "Minuet No. 6 for Piano, in D Major." We might tend to picture what it must have been like for dancers at the time of Mozart to dance formally to this accompanying minuet piece.

The fourth major category of philosophical questions with which to understand music is that pertaining to *Questions on the context of the piece*. One contextual question to ask is whether there is significance in knowing *That Mozart wrote bawdy letters to his cousin?* Mozart did write vulgar letters to his cousin, Maria Anna Thekla Mozart, and in one dated November 5,

1771, he referred to human excrement several times. But it didn't seem to be written as a result of any negative emotion. Rather, shocking humor was intended, as can be evidenced by the inclusion of intentional misspellings for the sake of humor in the same letter. For example, when addressing Maria's request for a portrait of him, Mozart wrote, "...I'll certainly spend [sic] it to you." Mozart was precociously creative from a very young age. That creativity spilled over into his personal life as well so that he took playfulness and made it creative as well. Using vulgar and lascivious language with his cousin just shows how he was pushing the envelope of creativity in more than just the musical area of his life. Mozart thought that his father, his principal instructor from an early age, was "exigent" (Gay 5). Perhaps because his father was such a strict and demanding instructor, Mozart needed a chance to unwind on occasion, and did so with adolescent naughtiness.

A second contextual question to consider is whether or not there is value in knowing *That D major was a significant key for Mozart?* Each key signature has its own uniqueness, and offers a framework that is distinguishable by the trained ear. Some, for instance, consider D major to be a lively key signature. Opinions like that might be based partially as a function of the structure of the keyboard on a piano itself. Each note is in only one place on the keyboard. The middle C is so called so because it occurs only once in approximately the middle of the keyboard and is approximately the middle of the piano's tonal range. In contrast, a guitar has two places where most notes can be played, although their timbres will be slightly distinct due to the difference in thickness of the two adjacent strings. But knowing that D major was a significant key for Mozart does have significance. If he'd have written the subject piece in A major, for example, it would have sounded differently in that tonal range and would have had a different aural effect as a result.

There are many questions that Rowell presented that help us analyze music. By using these questions as a guide by which to study a piece of music, we can learn much more about the music than just the notation. The piece itself, the context of the music, the listener and the composer himself all add elements to the philosophical discussion of appreciating Mozart's "Minuet No. 6 for Piano, in D Major" to its fullest.

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