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A Historicization of Mozart's Requiem K626 (Kyrie)

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Abstract

In this essay, I historicize Mozart's Requiem K626 through a musical analysis and an examination of the contextual background of his Kyrie. I argue that Mozart's compositional technique and procedure in his requiem mass was primarily influenced by preceding composers of the Baroque period, primarily J.S Bach and G.F Handel. These influences are evident in Mozart's stretto fugual procedure, counterpoint and thematic pattern characteristics of Baroque compositions. I also give a contextual historical discussion about the completion of the whole Requiem K626, highlighting the controversial debate surrounding authorship and authenticity of the requiem.

Keywords : Historicization, Mozart's, Requiem

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Introduction

In this essay, I historicize Mozart's Requiem K626 through a musical analysis and an examination of the contextual background of his Kyrie. I argue that Mozart's compositional technique and procedure in his requiem mass was primarily influenced by preceding composers of the Baroque period, primarily J.S Bach and G.F Handel. These influences are evident in Mozart's stretto fugal procedure, counterpoint and thematic pattern characteristics of Baroque compositions. I also give a contextual historical discussion about the completion of the whole Requiem K626, highlighting the controversial debate surrounding authorship and authenticity of the requiem.

Musical Analysis of Mozart's Kyrie (K626)

Mozart's *Kyrie* (K626) is a fugue in which both the subject and the countersubject are presented simultaneously. The first fugal subject is introduced by bass (m.1) and the countersubject is introduced by Alto (m.2) respectively. Both the subject and counter subject are characterized by a sequential movement of an ascending step, effected by the use of sixteenth notes.

In the first subject, Mozart uses a melodic motive that highlights the

tonic triad of d minor, also outlining the diminished seventh interval

extracted from the $\text{vii}^{\text{o}7}$ chord. Paul McGahie argues that this distinctive melodic outline was a popular Baroque motive (McGahie 2006: 51).

Kirkendale refers to the Baroque motivic pattern above as the “pathotype”, since it was always dramatically used to “express deep grief” (Kirkendale 1979:91). In Mozart’s *Kyrie*, this dramatic motivic pattern is used to effect a dark and sad mood of pleading for mercy, an important characteristic to a requiem mass.

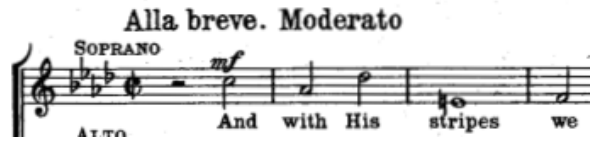
Figure 1: Opening motive- *Kyrie Eleison* K626



Source: *Requiem K 626: Vocal score* (Dover vocal scores).

In a related line of argument with McGahie and Kirkendale above, Christoff Wolff emphasizes that the material of Mozart’s *Kyrie* comes from an earlier chorus No.22 (And with his stripes we are healed) in G.F Handel’s *Messiah*. The theme in this chorus possesses strikingly similar characteristics as that of the primary theme in Mozarts *Kyrie*, in particular the opening interval of a major third, followed by the skip of a diminished seventh as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Opening motive- And with his Stripes we are healed (Chorus No.22 the Messiah)



Source: *The Messiah : An oratorio for four-part chorus of mixed voices, soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soli, and piano* (G. Schirmer's editions of oratorios and cantatas)

Mozart uses the same motivic structure in his fugue *Laudate Pueri* from his *Vesperae Solennes* -KV 339. The fact that Mozart uses fugal procedure to develop both his *Kyrie* and *Laudate* further emphasizes the influence his predecessors may have had on him as a composer¹. This is especially that the “fugue is a Baroque genre which grew out of several different Renaissance polyphonic traditions into a widely accepted procedure, particularly used by Northern German Lutheran organists” (McGahie 2006, p.1). McGahie further emphasizes that for Mozart, “fugue was an older technique learned in addition to the techniques within the universal Classical musical style of his own lifetime” (McGahie 2006, p.6).

Figure 2: Opening motive- Laudate Pueri KV 339

¹ For more analysis on how Baroque composers may have influenced Mozart's compositional technique, see also Chu (1979)

the descending leap of a diminished seventh. Stadler² further observed that both themes used in Mozart's *Kyrie* are also found in the chorus "Alleluia", from Handel's *Joseph and his Brethren*, HWV 59 as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: A juxtaposition of the Opening theme in Handel's "Alleluiah", We will rejoice in thy salvation and the opening theme in Mozart's "Kyrie"

The image displays two musical excerpts side-by-side for comparison. On the left is a vocal score for Handel's 'Alleluiah' from 'Joseph and his Brethren', HWV 59. It features four staves: Alto, Tenor, Bass, and Organ/Basses. The Alto part has the lyrics 'We will re-joice' and 'Frohlocket laut'. The Bass part has the lyrics 'Al-le-lu-jah, al-le-lu-jah!'. The organ/basses part provides a harmonic accompaniment. On the right is a vocal score for Mozart's 'Kyrie' from 'Requiem K 626'. It features two staves: Soprano and Bass. The Soprano part has the lyrics 'Chri-ste e-le' and the Bass part has the lyrics 'Ky-ri-e e-le i-son, e-le'. Both excerpts show a similar rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, and a melodic contour that descends and then ascends.

Source: *Joseph and His Brethren*, HWV 59 & *Requiem K 626*: Vocal score

As illustrated in figure 4 above, the rhythmic material, melodic contour and sequential material in both works by Handel and Mozart is significantly related. The examples cited so far allude to the influence that earlier composers such as Bach and Handel had on Mozart's compositions. The fact that Mozart rearranged several of Handel's oratorios between 1788 and 1790 makes it compellingly plausible that the theme in his *Kyrie* is indeed adapted from earlier works by Handel.

² See Jahn, 1882: p.374-75

The fugue takes the form of an agitated dialogue that intends to contrast the texts of *Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy) and *Christe eleison* (Christ have mercy). Both the *Kyrie eleison* and *Christe eleison* gain momentum with sequential sixteenth-note patterns, giving the movement a dramatic propulsive motion.

Mozart's use of fugal material in his *Kyrie* serves to illustrate his economy of ideas, characterized by his ability to compose an extended movement out of the same thematic materials. The fugue is an example of a stretto fugue, a style that reinforces imitation of the subject in close succession, so that the answer enters before the subject is completed. The stretto fugal style was often used by J.S Bach, for example in his *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen* BWV182 and the *Piano fugue in C*, BWV 846. Mozart's fugal procedure exhibited in the *Kyrie* is an indicator that he had absorbed the influence of J.S Bach's contrapuntal art and structure. Mozart's constant re-use of the same thematic material in a constantly changing variety of ways, primarily using canon, contributes to the rigor and dramatic propulsive character aforementioned.

The climax of the *Kyrie* starts on the third beat of measure 47, and ends on the third beat of measure 50. The climax is effected by the final

Christe stretto line in the soprano voice, propelling forward to a climatic progressive cadence on a diminished seventh chord in measure 50 followed by a fermata on a crotchet rest. This particular stretto line is also the highest pitched melodic line in the whole movement, starting at E5³. From measures 48-50, the other voices (alto, tenor and bass) use a homophonic texture to bring the intense polyphonic character of the whole movement to a pause. In order to communicate the interpretation of this climatic point to the audience, I suggest that performers would effect a *ritardando* in measure 49 to build towards the long dramatic pause at measure 50. In addition, measures 48-50 would be performed at the loudest dynamic marking in the whole movement to communicate that the movement has come to a point of no return.

The story of Mozart's *Kyrie* K626

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the whole requiem and the *Kyrie* in particular is the assertion that “the *Kyrie* was an incomplete section at the time of Mozart's death” (Leeson, 2005:54). The debate about the authenticity of Mozart's requiem was first initiated by Gottfried Webber in 1825⁴ and its rebuttals by Constanze, Mozart's widow. In this debate,

³ This highest pitched melodic line is a repetition from measures 40-42

⁴ *Über die Echtheit des Mozartschen Requiem, Caecilia 3 1823:205-29*

Webber argued that instrumental parts to the *Kyrie* were not completed by Mozart, but rather, by some of his students an argument that Constanze, Mozart's widow declined. Stanley Sadie argues that in this debate, accounts of Constanze cannot be solely relied upon because she as a benefactor of the requiem had much at stake. Constanze was "understandably concerned to protect her position with Count-Walsegg-Stuppach, who had commissioned the work and paid for it" (Sadie, 1990:1052, See also Richard Maunder 1988). Since Webber introduced the issue, the debate about who completed Mozart's requiem has been an issue of research in musicology scholarship.

German musicologist Franz Beyer examined the original manuscripts of Mozart's requiem, highlighting that additional handwritings were evident in some of the lines of the *Kyrie*. He also emphasizes that the original manuscript believed to have been written in Mozart's hand writing had an "abnormally high number of wrong notes for the two orchestral basset horns" (Beyer, 1971:14), something uncommon of Mozart's workmanship. In a related line of argument, Leeson argues; "but a high number of wrong notes for a specific instrument- one for which he had written with complete mastery on many occasions was an event without precedent" (Leeson, 2005:54, see also Moseley, 1989). According to Beyer's analysis, all the vocal parts were written by Mozart, but the instrumental sections showed

evidence of other handwritings. In a related manner, Maunder examines the background of the requiem with a focus on the stylistic features. His major point of emphasis is the voice leading and counterpoint used. Maunder's conclusion is that Mozart would "not permit in himself and his pupils, in church music and elsewhere, as regards parallel fifths and octaves and particular so called hidden fifths and octaves" (Maunder, 1988:67). Maunder's implicit argument relates with that of Beyer that the mistakes evident in sections of the requiem are not characteristic of Mozart's compositional abilities.

Beyer concluded that Süßmayr, one of Mozart's students was responsible for writing the instrumental parts to the *Kyrie*. In a related approach, Leopold Nowak conducted an investigation of the hand writing, demonstrating that the numerous mistakes such as placing on the stave of the whole-bar rest is a characteristic of Süßmayr's handwriting. The trumpet and drum parts which exhibit such a writing of rests can be attributed to Süßmayr. Wolff concludes that there is no doubt that Süßmayr played a crucial role in the completion of the Requiem. Since "he acted as Mozart's assistant during the last months of the latter's life, copying and carrying out certain compositional work as well" (Wolff, 1994: 26).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to give a musical analysis and contextual plus historical analysis to Mozart's *Kyrie* K626. My crosscutting argument is that Mozart's compositional technique and procedure was primarily influenced by preceding composers of the Baroque period, primarily J.S Bach and G.F Handel. Such influences are evident in Mozart's use of stretto fugual procedure, counterpoint, and a thematic pattern characteristic of Baroque compositions. I have also discussed a brief history behind the completion of the whole Requiem K626, highlighting the controversial debate behind authorship and authenticity of the Requiem.

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