

Giuseppe Sarti and Mozart's Quartet, K. 421

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Criticisms addressed to the Mozart quartets, K. 421 in D minor and K. 465 in C major, have been attributed to Giuseppe Sarti for roughly a century and a half. Conceivably, the attribution is correct, although the manuscript of this unpublished writing, addressed to a Milanese young lady, has never been found, to the best of my knowledge. The available sources are two references in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (33:540 [August 1824]; 23:373-78 [June 1832]). The first states briefly that Sarti had written *Osservazioni critiche sopra un quartetto di Mozart* which had been read by Karl Mozart and, according to Karl, by Wolfgang, too. Both reportedly felt that it was written in a bitter spirit. The later notice is a much more detailed description of the contents and of an anonymous Milan correspondent's search for the manuscript. He writes: "*Da es mir nun gelungen ist, dasselbe zu erhalten, so folgt hier der angekündigte Auszug, in dem es sich noch eine andere, als die schon erwähnte Mozart'sche Stelle handelt.*" The title is now given as *Examen acustico fatto sopra due frammenti di Mozart, da Giuseppe Sarti*. While the first notice in *AMZ* quotes the beginning of the C major Quartet, the second specifies the criticisms of this work and also goes into a similar denunciation of the beginning of the development section of the first movement of the D minor Quartet.

The quarrel that followed, presumably launched by Sarti, has engaged the attention of many writers including Fétis, Oublicheff, Jahn, and Ernest Newman. It is with misgivings that I, too, join the fray, for it is apparent that little can or should be done to applaud or lament the clear victory of time for K. 421 and K. 465. I do so, however, simply to underscore a curious preoccupation of the past and, unfortunately, of the present too, with minutiae at the expense of inclusive meaning.

In the case of the D minor Quartet, the one on which I propose to dwell exclusively, the over-all pathos and tragic disposition of the work, only four years removed from *Don Giovanni*, has been lost in a detailed account of the alleged abuses of Pythagorean *apotomes*, *limmas*, and *minimas*. It is the contention of this writer that such criticisms should not of necessity be swept under the rug, but that they take on dwindling significance when they

are viewed in terms of the infinite adjustability of the sensitive performer, listener (as opposed to the unyielding mathematically calculated edicts of the Herr Gottlob who seems to have provided Sarti with his intonational ammunition), and the structural analyst who is finally in a position to judge detail in relation to broader sense. The analyst need not restate the tragic essence of the work, for Mozart has done it for all time, but he can perhaps suggest the uncanny hearing behind its expressive disposition, without which dark intensity might easily have become bathetic chaos. Perhaps out of such a discussion, if successful, there might emerge a keener sense of the nature of musical criticism.

In order to comprehend the broad structure of the development section, it is necessary to back up to the end of the exposition. When this is done, it becomes apparent that, whatever significance might be accorded the $E\flat$ chord of bar 42, the inclusive plan is the connecting of the mediant chord, previously established as F major, and the A minor-major chord of bars 50 (A minor) to 66 (A major) as in Example 1.



Two prolongations occur in the detailed manifestation of this plan: the technique that leads from the mediant to the dominant harmonies (bars 40-50); the extension whereby the $C\sharp$ of the A chord (bar 50) becomes $C\sharp$ (bar 66) in preparing for the return of the tonic harmony of the recapitulation of bars 70ff.

The first of these (bars 40-50) brings to the fore the $E\flat$ chord of bar 42. It stands as another token of Mozart's procedure in beginning his development sections—the seeking out of a remote base of operations which seems to break with its immediate past while peering ahead to an uncertain future. Such apparently radical departures from an established tonal center, whether they occur in K. 421 or in the G minor (K. 550) or C major (K. 551) symphonies, should be enjoyed for their own value but understood analytically in the light of broader relationships. In the case of K. 421, the passage can be most insightfully heard as a voice-leading or horizontally propelled relationship. The outer voice octave, $f-f^2$, of bar 40 moves to

E-c¹ of bars 45-46 (c¹ of bar 45 is an anticipation of the $\frac{6}{4}$ of bar 46). These structural octaves are circumvented by the introduction of E \flat , eventually bearing the significance of D \sharp , in bars 42-45 in the manner of Example 2. Example 2a sketches a generalized background, 2b a more detailed representation of the techniques employed, while 2c graphs the striking connection of the bass's E \flat and F through a descent of a seventh.

Ex. 2

2a. Bars: 40 45 46 40 41 42 43 44 47 50
 8 17 (8) 8 10 8 17 (8) 8
 cont. prep.

2b. becomes

2c.

It is this passage that reportedly offended Sarti who, according to the Milan correspondent of *AMZ*, wrote:

"The E following E \flat (bar 45) in failing to go to F, creates an arrant *apotome mesodica*, one of the greatest musical faults. In order to make such a detour, E \flat must become D \sharp , which might perhaps have happened here if the E \flat had not been clearly established by D in the first quarter of the bar and the two preceding bars; hence it is impossible for the listener to believe that he hears D \sharp , thus being spared from a horrible sensation on the entrance of E."

It is not necessary to enter into such notational quibbling, for in the end it is the performer, not the scribe, who must protect us from the horrors of the *apotome mesodica*. The important point is that the critic, presumably Sarti, could not have suggested a continuing motion to F if he had perceived, however dimly, the intent of the entire passage. Curiously enough, the critic describes Mozart as one who "has not concerned himself with counterpoint" (shades of Padre Martini and Thomas Attwood!). Yet it is only by reference to contrapuntal procedures, now expressed in a highly mature and unique manner, that the structure of the passage can be comprehended. The E \flat chord, in this sense, stands as consonant preparation for the dissonance of the F-seventh or augmented-sixth chord of bar 45. As indicated in

Example 2b, the guiding outer voice relationships are, 8—10—8—flat 7 (sharp 6)—8.

Sarti was correct in construing the E \flat as, behaviorally, a D \sharp , but hopelessly wrong in reviving memories of Pythagoras to stir up a notational fracas. Should the embellishing D of bars 43–45 have been written as C \sharp and the entire section, bars 42–45, notated as a D \sharp major chord moving eventually to the augmented sixth chord of bar 45? Mozart, in all probability, would have answered, NO!, but in his colorful Salzburgian patois. For Sarti's continued good health, it is just as well that he seems to have had no opportunity to examine the third movement, *Adagio ma non troppo*, of the G minor Quintet, K. 516, bars 62–64. Clearly, Pythagoreanisms are not applicable to intensified chromaticism, which must attempt to resolve notational difficulties in a staff system that serves only diatonic and the most modest chromatic ventures.

The three remaining criticisms addressed to K. 421 are still related to small details and need not detain us in our attempt to reveal an inclusive frame of reference. Briefly then: the minor second of bar 54 is considered wrong because it lasts approximately two seconds rather than a proper one second as taught by the science of harmony, or a proper half bar as allowed in the study of counterpoint. The 16th note of the viola, G \sharp , also in bar 54 is considered very harsh even though it is fleeting. The upper tone of the trill in the second violin, bar 55, forms a false octave with C \sharp in the first violin, thus by extension creating another *apotome* and another instance of depraved taste.

Missing from these criticisms, and also from all subsequent reviews pro and con of these passages, is any attempt to discover a frame of reference. Certainly the harshness of the dissonances represents the brooding expressiveness of the work rather than a model for textbooks in strict counterpoint or harmony. In this sense they are their own justification, if justification is needed. Yet it is only through the procedures of counterpoint and harmony, properly extended, that a grasp of these challenging bars becomes possible.

Arrival at and extension of the A chord can be most clearly explicated when presented in three sections with a short addendum. They are: affirmation of the A minor chord through its applied dominant, with the posting of the perfect fifth, e 2 to a 1 , in the upper parts as a significant interval (bars 46–53); the

reaching of a neighboring-passing chord (upper voices, d^3-g^1 , against the bass B^b) through a change of octave register (bars 53-56); the downward prolonging of the neighboring-passing chord until its arrival at the A major chord (bars 59-66); the addendum in the form of a return to the tonic D chord (bars 66-70). An inclusive sketch with the sections marked, follows in Example 3.

Ex. 3

1. 2. 3. Addum.

D A B V

Ad section 1: the connecting of the upper voice relationship, E down to A, is carried out by a stepwise descent, leading first from E to C in bar 50, and then by a filled-in fifth (bar 50-53) initially interrupted by the gently frustrating B^b of bar 51, and then completed in the succeeding bars. The course of action is sketched in Example 4.

Ex. 4

Bar 46 50 53

Ad section 2: The connection of the A minor chord (bar 53) with the neighboring-passing chord (bar 59) is paralleled by a change of register as represented in Example 5. The first illustra-

Ex. 5

Bar 53 56 59

thus

Ex. 6

Bars 53 56 59 65 66
 D- V . N V
 then

Musical score for Example 6, showing two systems of music. The first system covers bars 53-66, with a bracket labeled "then" above bars 53-66 and "D- V . N V" below. The second system covers bars 63-70, with a bracket labeled "for" above bars 63-70 and "N" below. The score includes treble and bass staves with various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

tion (Example 5a) sketches the direct one-register connection; 5b illustrates the techniques that bring about a change of register.

Ad section 3 and the addendum: Example 6 outlines the long descent from the high D of bar 59 to the lower D and C \sharp of bars 65-66. The addendum is included.

One final summary sketch remains, the aim of which is to represent the over-all shape of this, to say the least, remarkable development section.

Ex. 7

Bar: 40 45 46 53 56 59 65 66 70

D- III b7(♭) 9 L.S.

Regardless of whether there might be agreement or disagreement on the manner or the matter of sketching the structural elements of the development of the first movement of K. 421, one thing should be clear: in the light of the sweeping persuasive force of the whole, *apostrophes*, *limmas*, and *minimas* must be re-interred in their respective pyramids. But perhaps more than this, one must wish, I suppose in vain, that our critics and historians, if not our theorists and analysts, had a greater sense of the relationship of the detail to the pervasive whole. One can be thankful that Paul Henry Lang, to whom this article is respectfully dedicated, although he has never to my knowledge made a graphic analysis, has nevertheless demonstrated with constancy in his musical views an insight and judgment that often follow from or may be demonstrably present in this kind of structural analytic activity.