

ON MOZART'S MUSICAL LANGUAGE

1. Grammar

Mozart often shapes his music like structures of language. Even the simple theme of his *Sonata facile* K. 545 is structured like a spoken utterance.



W. A. Mozart, Sonata facile, K. 545, 1st movement, main theme

The direction that each one of the first two bars moves to is mainly upwards, like a voice that rises when something is said. The second part of the theme is less homogeneous in its movement. Bar 3 leaps up to the top in a melodious zigzag movement, only to descend onto its goal in bar 4: the main statement has been made, the voice is lowered. The segments are clearly marked by rests, comparable to full stops and commas in language. This division into two parts that is included in the melodic profile is made more obvious through the grammar, as it were. Question and answer, main statement and subordinate clause complement each other and make up a clearly structured whole. Such attempts to present clear forms consisting of manageable units are what makes the music immediately intelligible to the listeners. The structures become comprehensible and, not least, easy to remember, a quality that distinguishes Mozart's "musical language" to an exceptionally high degree.

2. Rhetoric

While the comprehensible formal structure in Mozart's music is relatively easy to follow, the meaning and content is far more difficult to grasp for the modern listener. Eloquent sounds or even conversing rests in the head motif of the Fantasy in C minor K. 475? – Is it possible that Mozart wishes to convey more than just an expressive melody? Even the few notes at the beginning of this work prove to be more eloquent than one might think.

Starting with the key of c minor, not determined by general accidentals at the beginning of the line but by individual accidentals before the appropriate notes outlines a profound horizon of meaning. As early as 1691, French gamba player and teacher Jean Rousseau, not to be confused with his famous namesake, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote about the function of this key in his 'For Laments and Other Plaintive Themes' (*Pour les plaintes & tous les sujets lamentable*). Johann Joachim Quantz, flute teacher for Frederick the Great, certifies in his study book for flute, published in 1752, that c minor is used for 'the miserable affect', but also for 'the affect of love, tenderness, flattery', and for 'an angry emotion, such as recklessness, rage and desperation.' Swabian poet, musician and music writer Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart regarded the key of C minor as a key for 'declarations of love, and at the same time, the key of unhappy love', as he wrote in his *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* ('Ideas on an Aestheticism of the Art of Music'), written around 1784/85, i.e. at the same time as Mozart's Fantasy. 'Every bit of languishing, pining, sighing of the soul that is drunk with love is found in this sound', as he went on to explain more precisely. This means that lamenting, suffering,

love and laments in love, pining, sighing and grief were the emotions one used to express in the key of C minor. The fact that the two final chorusses of Johann Sebastian Bach's great passions as well as numerous Requiems of the 18th century are written in this key cannot be considered pure coincidence.

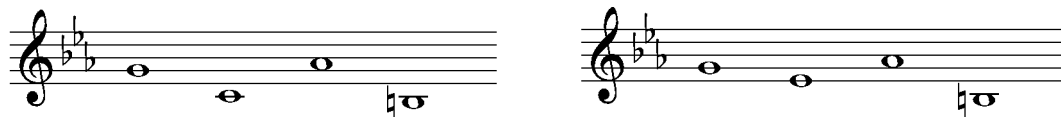
Mozart's Fantasy in C minor seems to fit into a comparable context of meaning.



W. A. Mozart, Fantasy in C minor, K. 475, beginning

The first notes already fully occupy the frame of affects assigned to this key. Like an enormous exclamation mark, the forte *c* is presented in unison at the start, an unmistakable signal for attention that suggests important statements to follow. The melodic continuation, still in unison, but piano now, is interlarded with figures from the vocabulary of musical rhetoric, symbols that are immediately connected to those affects typical for *c* minor: first, there is the augmented second from e-flat' to f-sharp' introducing a note that does not belong to the key of C minor, furthermore an interval that is difficult to sing, is prohibited according to the strict rule of part-writing and signals something extraordinary in those instances where it does appear. This rhetorical figure is called – in Greek – *pathopoiia*, which means “rousing of passions”; this figure was used to depict pain, laments, crying and similar emotions.

The four notes that follow look back on a long tradition as a musical symbol. They link the root and fifth of a minor key with their appropriate semitone neighbours above and below them. In *c* minor, for example, these are *c*', *g*', a-flat' and b-natural. The sequence of those four notes may differ, and the root may sometimes be replaced with the third (in *c* minor, this would be e-flat'). The most frequent constellations are as follows:



However, the sequence as found in the head motif of the Fantasy in C minor is also quite frequent, e.g. in the theme of the Fugue in G minor from the first part of J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

The tonal combinations full of tension both in terms of music and of harmony are also excellently suited to present suffering, pain and lament. Many composers used those notes, like Bach, Handel and Haydn before Mozart, to name just the most famous. Handel, for example, used it in his chorus *And with His stripes we are healed* from the *Messiah*, or Mozart himself later on in the Kyrie fugue of his *Requiem*. In terms of

rhetoric, this is another *pathopoiia*, and therefore this combination often used as a theme or thematic head is called the *pathos type* in short.

The second bar in Mozart's Fantasy continues with the same musical vocabulary, but now places it into the harmonious context of the parts that are no longer written to be in unison. Such continuing musical flow is interrupted by rests, but those rests are far more than just a non-sound of notes, or pure marks that signal individual units. They are used very consciously, and appear like timid question marks following the short-winded, sighing motifs. In fact, they are themselves like sighs, almost like an "Ah" when drawing breath. And as such, they once again fulfil a rhetorical purpose and are referred to a *suspiratio* (Latin) in the specialist terminology. The meaning is nothing but precisely that "sighing Ah".

It is almost unbelievable how much significance every single note of the beginning of this fantasy has. Mozart's contemporaries knew this language and its rhetorical gestures. Because of vocal music in both the opera and the church where such musical turns were linked to the actual meaning of the text and were frequently perceived in the appropriate context of meaning, the individual meanings and implications were well known. They would be associated when such figures were played by instruments only, and people understood the message the composer wished to convey.

3. Drama

Mozart's occasionally brooding pauses should rather be placed into a dramatic context. They are usually found when the musical action is brought to certain head, as if standing at a crossroads, as is the case in the development of that strange Allegro in B-flat major K. 400 from the first Vienna period. The piece reflects Mozart's life in that circle of friends with the sisters Sophie and Constanze Weber, whose family had moved to Vienna via Munich since their first acquaintance with Mozart in the winter of 1777/78 in Mannheim. There is no other example of Mozart explicitly mentioning people's names in the score of an instrumental piece, actually turning them into part of the music. The two motifs he later uses to specifically call the two sisters by their names are first heard before the pause. Is it possible that Mozart carefully thought about this when writing the pause which – as is so often the case in his music – spans several notes – whether he should really call them by their names or not? In any case, this passage is a dramatic point of culmination. After the initial return to the lively starting theme at the beginning of the middle section, Mozart then introduces a completely new, almost talking motif with a slurred suspension and almost stammering repetitions of notes in bars 62–63, turned to G minor. The exuberant tempo seems somewhat slowed down, suddenly there is a new perspective, new protagonists, a changed setting.

W. A. Mozart, Allegro in B-flat major, K. 400, beginning of the middle section (the upper voice only)

This is followed by the calling motifs, first without names, but rhetorically clearly signifying an exclamation. Sighs which are assigned a questioning character because of the quaver upbeats then lead to the pause across two crotchets: an uncertain hesitation, then gathering up all possible courage to the upward run to finally utter the two sisters' names, a miniature opera scene, realized with the means of musical rhetoric and structures similar to language.

For us living in the 20th and 21st centuries, such rhetorical and symbolic content of this music is not immediately apparent anymore. In the course of the 19th century, these were successively lost as the means of expression in musical language. However, Mozart's contemporaries would understand it as an omnipresent vocabulary, comprehensible across the borders of countries and languages. In fact, this was so much the case that Joseph Haydn could confidently state to Mozart before taking his leave for England: *My language is understood all over the world.*

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(Translation Sibyl Marquardt)