CHAPTER 10

Time and Space in W.A. Mozart’s Ave Verum Corpus (1791): Transcendence and the Fictive Space of the Musical Work

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Introduction

Ave Verum Corpus, a Latin hymn known since the end of the thirteenth century, has been set to music several times. Well-known composers, like Orlando di Lasso (1532–94), William Byrd (1540–1623), Franz Liszt (1811–1886), Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921), Edward Elgar (1857–1934) and Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) have composed for this text, but W.A. Mozart’s short motet Ave Verum Corpus kv 618 has gained fame beyond any of these. It was written in June 1791, only a few months before his death, to be used, most probably, for the Corpus Christi festival in Baden, outside Vienna. The rather brief piece, 46 bars with a playing time of three or four minutes, has since been regarded as one of Mozart’s finest compositions of church music. It has been proclaimed an important example of Mozart’s characteristic late style: a composition which unites simplicity with harmonic subtleness, and has even been compared to the Palestrina style of the late 16th century.¹

In a remarkable analysis of the work, Bernd Edelmann has taken his point of departure in this traditional view, which he regards as a topos in the Mozart literature on Ave Verum Corpus. He has taken up the task of describing precisely – in detail – what Mozart, musically speaking, did to the text, and in addition he has contributed with considerations on the aesthetic and theological content of the work. In the final part of this article, I will revert to Edelmann’s analysis as a background to an interpretation of Mozart’s piece from the point of view of religious aesthetics, i.e. a discussion of whether this work by Mozart can be said to represent an experience of transcendence, and if so, in what way. Another question that is relevant here is whether such an experience of transcendence can also be communicated through the music alone, independently of the text.

In the first part of this article, I will comment on the relationship between the musical work and its liturgical function, in light of a modern musical

listening practice and work-based aesthetics, especially with regard to a present-day understanding of Mozart.

The gradually developed western concept of musical “works” as a central category for music history and aesthetics within so-called classical music, has been problematized and denied by many modern composers, music historians and music philosophers. Yet, there is no doubt that this aesthetic has preserved its dominant influence on the practice of listening up to this very day, both when it comes to public performance and private listening. In some connections, and this is not least true of so-called sacred music, this has a quite problematic influence on the perception of the music in question. In the second part of the article, within the context of the philosophy of religion, I will connect K.E. Løgstrup's discussion of time and space in his *Metafysik IV, Skabelse og Tilintetgørelse (Creation and Annihilation)* (1978) with the concept of the musical “work.” Løgstrup's discussion leads to an idea of a “fictive space” constituted by a melody, and in that context, I will include Aleida Assmann's ideas on memory space. Finally, in the third and last part of the article, I will apply the considerations from the first two parts in my interpretation of Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus* in the light of religious aesthetics.

**Music and Liturgy**

Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus* must originally have been written as part of the celebration of the day of *Corpus Christi* (dealt with below in Part 3 in more detail), but today this piece is predominantly performed as an independent “work,” i.e. an aesthetic product which has an autonomous value, independent of its religious or ritual function. As a small, but highly valued element in Mozart's *oeuvre* it is often played in church concerts, but also in choral concerts in secular contexts. Last, but not least, the work is heard in the personal (electronic) listening practice of individuals, i.e. performed privately, for example via a CD recording, just as it is also frequently heard in radio transmissions of classical music, either recorded at a concert or played from a CD.

Historically, this has primarily been made possible by a technological development which has made music of very different genres, styles and instrumental combinations available to everybody in technologically and economically developed societies. Thus, the choice of music very much occurs on the basis of individual taste and immediate inclination. I put on a CD with precisely the music I feel like hearing at this very moment; similarly, I choose or reject radio programs at will. In other words, it is a consumption of music which in some