

Self-Portrait with Mozart (1994)

program note

The story of this unusual piece is itself somewhat unusual: in the spring of 1991, while I was in Washington for the National Chamber Orchestra's première of my *Crossing Points*, the conductor Piotr Gajewski asked me if I'd be interested in completing an unfinished fragment of a first movement of a Mozart piece – which he'd perform the following season. I hesitated at first; "finishing" a Mozart piece seemed like a very strange thing to do, and the idea brought up several questions: why did Mozart leave it unfinished in the first place (maybe it would be better left that way)? Can it be finished in such a way as to create the illusion that Mozart wrote the whole thing? And if so, what is the value of such a work? After all, even the composer of a "convincing" completion could never claim to have done what Mozart would have done on his own.

On the other hand, it seemed like a very intriguing project. So, after debating about it, and in spite of my doubts, I decided to do it – with the intention of completing the movement in a stylistically consistent way. As it turned out, the first 1/5 of the completed piece is entirely by Mozart, and I wrote the rest. However, since all the themes but one are Mozart's (a result of the way sonata-allegro form works), it's somewhat misleading to say I wrote 4/5 of the work. Maybe the best way to explain this is to say that Mozart's spirit is everywhere in the movement, even though he actually wrote only a small part of it. The piece was performed in December of 1991, with Jody Gatwood and myself as soloists. I have derived a great deal of pleasure from this project – writing it, playing it, and thinking the whole thing over many times since.

Then, another strange thing happened: the more I thought about it, the more I couldn't put the piece down. It didn't seem right to compose a second and third movement in the style of Mozart – there are no sketches or fragments of Mozart's for either one. But I just couldn't let the completed first movement stay by itself. So, I decided to place it as the second movement of a four-movement structure, in which other themes of Mozart, as well as themes from works of mine would appear. But there are also Mozart-like themes of my own in it! – for example, the third movement is entirely original music,

despite some appearances to the contrary. And, to make things even more elusive, Mozart's music is at times superimposed on mine, or manipulated in various ways. So it even happens that his music sounds as much like mine as mine is like his! (By the way, all the actual Mozart in the work that is not part of the fragment comes from the first and third movements of the piano sonata in A minor, K. 310, composed at around the same time as the fragment.)

For me, this work has been a tremendously enriching aesthetic experience, with many provocative and fascinating issues raised. Above all, I have tried to create an integrated, complete musical composition – always a difficult task but obviously more challenging than usual in this case.

Joel Hoffman