

## About the center of the silent wor(l)d.

by Timothy Nelson

Mozart's clarinet quintet was TS Eliot's favorite piece of music. It is said that he would spend evenings listening to it, enamored of the composer's "economy". I only learned this very recently, long after "Figaro in Four Quartets" was created and in its final form. I find myself turning to this fact as a sort of buoy, defining a concrete line between these two great geniuses. It's a life-raft for me as I struggle to talk about a piece which I feel so deeply, and to defend a connection between two works of which I am absolutely certain, and yet one which remains vague and hard to finally define.

Mozart's "La Nozze di Figaro" is more than just the first of the composer's collaborations with Lorenzo da Ponte, a beloved comic opera where thematic and musical wit merge on the highest levels. It is also the greatest example of a work which forms the backbone of a life in opera. A singer will spend a lifetime growing through the roles of this opera – growing older and digging deeper from Figaro and the Count to Bartolo, or from Barbarina to Susanna to the Countess and, later in life, finally to Marcellina. The role is not dissimilar from that which this most beloved of operas plays for directors and conductors. We will spend a lifetime with this music, with these characters, with the dynamic fabric of emotions, returning to the same piece and understanding it more personally each time as we age through experience. It is the wondrous privilege we have in making opera, and it is the wonder of "La Nozze di Figaro" that it not only endures this sort of exploration, but that it compels one, also with an unbearable lightness of being, forward into the journey.

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

It occurs to me that this aspect of Mozart's opera is not only external to its performance tradition, but contained also within the internal fibers of the piece. It is a piece about the buoyant tendency of life to propel itself forward towards joy at different temporal moments in the human experience – it is a generational piece in this way. The profound folly of love, that essential metaphor for our being, is experienced in one work by the nascent teenage couple, the young hopeful newlyweds, the wounded and desperate husband and wife at middle age, and a couple beginning with age finally to perceive. This to me is what "La Nozze di Figaro" is really about. They are really the same couple, they are us and we are them. The plot is but a framework through which to explore these expanding meta-generational truths, it is ultimately insignificant and transcended by what the piece really touches upon. What Mozart's score does is to make the experience of "Figaro" about so much more than a parlor-comedy narrative or even a plotted political manifesto, a story which will fall away in the revelation of more fundamental and universal human truths. We sense in the music of this opera an aching joy that is at the essence of each heartbreak and of all healing.

Viewed in this way it is in music-theater what the "Four Quartets" is in music-poetry. I use this definer for TS Eliot's final work because he himself thought of his poems as musical compositions, as do writers like Edward Albee or even James Joyce in his "Chamber Music". The "Four Quartets", composed on the eve of the second World War and when Eliot's own health was failing, is highly structured, each of the four poems being divided further into five movements (the present work borrows this same form). The number four was intended by Eliot to reference the four seasons, and textual allusions to this structuring conceit peppers the total composition. Written over a number of years, the quartets use a complexity of style to consider in language humankind's experience and place

within the fullness of time. He freely considers the power of memory and the limits of language to express exactly what we mean whenever we attempt to describe what it feels like to “be”:

*Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it.*

And he delights finally in the fundamental paradox that is at the root of the human condition: beginnings are endings, endings are beginnings, movement is only truly attained through stillness, we climb only when we fall and find understanding when not perceiving at all:

*At the still point of the moving world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline, except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

Or said most precisely and profoundly:

*A condition of complete simplicity  
(costing not less than everything)*

The epic poem begins with just such a paradox, a linguistic one which, while presenting the opportunity for a rhetorical witticism which is itself pregnant with meaning, ponders a deeper paradox of the universe.

*Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.*

Here Eliot, as is his style, is referencing a palindromic composition (one which can be played or sung in either direction, and therefore necessarily is the same when read forward from the beginning or backwards from the end, arriving at a single central note) from the 14<sup>th</sup> century composer Guillaume de Machaut called “Ma fin est mon commencement, et mon commencement est ma fin” (“in my end is my beginning and in my beginning is my end”). The overt allusion to a wide body of sources, from various times and parts of the world's story, reflects clearly something that is true of all creative work, that it exists within a tradition of thought stretching before and after, and that the creative mind draws constantly from this well of human experience (expressed most notably in Shakespeare). Amazingly Eliot does this precisely in a poem which is itself considering how our lives, personal agonies, are part of a larger ocean of human experience, so that nothing is ever lost, and that death is conceived of life, and life of death.

*Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while the dust moves*

*There rises the hidden laughter  
Of children in the foliage,  
Quick now, here, now, always  
Ridiculous the waste sad time.  
Stretching before and after.*

That Eliot's poem considers the nature of time, the power of memory or projected hope, the subjective experience of time's passage as something that cannot be measured definitely or uniquely, is a product of the time in which Eliot was writing. Albert Einstein's theory of special relativity was published in 1905, and marked the beginning of a paradigm shift in the way public consciousness understood the nature of time. Time was no longer conceived of as an objective truth, but as a relative force. Worlds could be imagined where time moved in other directions, at various speeds, or where past and future existed simultaneous with present. Most shattering, time could be thought of as spacial, as having conceptual substance, and being determinatively bound to its observation and experience. Past and present **are** contained within future, and future **is** in past – all time **is** eternally present. The poem does not use an imagined conceit of time as metaphor for understanding human truth, but rather considers the true nature of being human within a newly, perhaps still dimly, perceived actual time.

Mozart's music, and particularly “La Nozze di Figaro”, is itself such a comment on the relationship of the human experience within time. Musics become a definable language through style, and Mozart composed, and communicated through, the classical style. Whereas the Baroque, and Renaissance musical style before it, consisted of horizontal lines or voices simultaneously spun out like threads, meaning being contained both in melody and in the larger juxtaposition of vocal point against point (and any larger architecture being, if not accidental, at least of secondary consideration), the classical style consists of vertically conceived phrase units (mainly a melodic phrase against accompanying harmonic figures) connected to constructed larger and larger units that finally form a complete structure. These units are of varying lengths, occurring at varying intervals, and so the classical style is consumed with periodicity as a way of expressing musical time. The importance of the larger singular structure of a composition (rhythmic and tonal) is total, and melody and melodic counterpoint are but tools with which to build that structure.

This style is itself born out of a shifting paradigm in the way public consciousness was conceiving of time's nature. Cartesian thought (ideas expressed by French Enlightenment philosopher Rene Descartes) would understand the universe as divisible to smaller and smaller units, and that perception of the workings of these units would eventually allow perception of the overall workings of the universe. Nature could be understood by the study of its pieces, the human body could be reduced and comprehended through its parts, and time could be measured by hours and seconds. This was made manifest with the invention and mass proliferation of the clock, a metaphor for the new conceptual paradigm. The gears add up finally to a clock, the machine, and the classical style is just such a mechanistic language of interlocking phrase-parts. This is why the fugue was ultimately replaced by the sonata as the principal organized musical form in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

“La Nozze di Figaro”, as has been popularly noted, takes this structuring practice to its furthest potential – phrases become sections become arias become finales become acts become an opera, and the principal is used rhythmically and tonally. The essence of Mozart's genius, however, is not in his mastery of the classical style, a skill that makes him articulate, but not necessarily meaningful. Mozart's particular genius rests in the ineffable but recognizable agency of his music to reach beyond the limits of style and imply a more fundamental truth. “Figaro” is more than its story, music is deeper than style, and time is immeasurable. Here “La Nozze di Figaro” and the “Four Quartets” meet briefly in

conversation, just as “Figaro in Four Quartets” imagines older and younger versions of the opera's characters meeting themselves on “one mad day” (as Beaumarchais originally subtitled the play on which Mozart based his opera). Eliot says it better:

*Time past and time future  
Allow but little consciousness.  
To be conscious is not to be in time  
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
**Only through time time is conquered.***

The “Four Quartets” are bound up in questions of faith, as Eliot sought meaning in a devout mystical reading of Anglican theology. But, because “La Nozze di Figaro” is about the buoyant essence of human experience, about love(!), it is equally bound up in questions of faith and the spirit. Both pieces have a peaceful inevitability and inherent sense of inevitable peace. It is touching and meaningful that Eliot expresses this primary aspect of his work not with his own words, but by alluding to those of yet another 14<sup>th</sup> century visionary, the mystic Julian of Norwich:

*And all shall be well and  
All manner of things shall be well.*