

*It has been argued that Mozart's Sonata k331 has a weak 1<sup>st</sup> movement as it has a series of short passages lacking in continuity, tonal variety and musical development. Discuss.*

To answer this question fully, we must look at each criticism in turn- lack of continuity, lack of tonal variety and lack of musical development- individually before concluding using all the evidence.

The first movement of Sonata K331 is comprised of a theme, six variations and a coda. The theme comprises of 18 bars: four times four bar phrases with an 'extension' tacked onto the end. Mozart followed this strict binary theme but this does not mean that the music is at all predictable; he uses different techniques to bring the best out of this form, as detailed later. The extension is an example of Mozart surprising the listener and enhancing the journey to the end of the theme. Each of the groups of four bars ends with a cadence. This is periodic phrasing, one of many signatures of 'galant' musical style (also known as Viennese classical music) that had its emphasis on pleasing the ear with simple melody than brash counterpoint or intricate texture.

It would be wrong to assume that the basic 8 bar theme (disregarding for a moment the 2 bar extension) and it's 6 variations are prone to lack of continuity- although the form can be clearly heard and there is distinct difference between each variation, several dominating melodies and musical ideas run through the piece. The Andante rarely leaves the key of A major, giving the listener a solid base from which the melodies spring from and grounds the listener so when Mozart embellishes and decorates the notes in later variations, the driving force behind the music are still recognisable.

Continuity can also be judged by the form of the piece. The binary form theme of 4-bar antecedent followed by four bar consequent lets each train of melody be absorbed and compared easily. However, on the other side of the argument, the form could be criticised for being too predictable- all six variations follow exactly the same 18 bar pattern with the same pattern of imperfect and perfect cadences (the cadence formation can be seen below). This could be countered by contrasting the first movement to the radically different form later in the piece and by pointing out that the use of the two bar extension was unusual and Mozart added this primarily to avoid becoming too predictable.

A piece lacking in continuity may also have several ideas that may only appear for short periods in the piece or not work well together. However, Mozart uses the same simple melodic ideas throughout this movement that does provide continuity. He achieves this

through using the melody within different textures and not using much counterpoint at all.

Next is the question of tonal variety- Mozart's use of chords and shape in the piece. There is a good argument for the lack of tonal variety in the piece- in the whole Andante only one type of chromatic chord is used (in bar 12 of variations 1-4). Also, Mozart's reliance on the tonic and dominant chords is evident; in the theme, over 75% of the chords are in the tonic (A major) or the dominant (E major).

However, as the variations progress, the listener can hear plenty of tonal structure to ward off criticism. Right from the beginning of Variation 1 (bar 19) the theme is decorated in the right hand with semi-tonal appoggiaturas as well as contrasting semi-quaver octaves in bar 23. There are many tonal marks in the piece- 'sfp' emphasis the ability of the piano to give the sharp loud to soft quality in bar 28. At the beginning of variation two the LH and RH swap over and the LH has the triplets that add momentum to the piece. This excites the listener and stops the predictability Mozart has been accused of.

In variation 3 the piece hints at a key change to D minor with even the inclusion of a Diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord on D# at the end of bar 66. However, we return to A major by variation four and here we see rising and falling thirds outlining the theme's shape and again giving a larger tonal landscape.

Finally, we must look at musical development and see what makes this music stand out. Mozart decorates this sonata with extreme precision. Acciaccatura's liven up the left hand beginning in bar 41 and trills on demisemiquavers in bars 45 and 46 provide provocative lead-ins to runs, enhanced by the semi-quaver triplets in the same bar. More decorative variation can be heard in bar 81 where the left hand plays chromatic appoggiaturas followed by a fast bridge in bar 83.

Also in bar 83 we have the marking 'sforzando', the first time since the theme. This is followed in bars 83 to 90 with a repeat of bars 73-79. Is this repetition of bars a positive or negative attribute? Critics would argue that this shows a bland use of space and lack of tonal variation but others believe this is just another tool used by Mozart to make the listener appreciate the strong melody of the movement.

Initially, the sonata could be criticised as in the title, and does indeed have short passages that do not lend themselves to continuity and vast tonal contrast. However, Mozart has managed to overcome this and, through the tools explained above, produced an interesting and enjoyable piece.

Ben Sellers.  
19/1/01