

Simon P. Keefe. *Mozart's Piano Concertos: Dramatic Dialogue in the Age of Enlightenment*. Woodbridge, Suffolk (U.K.): The Boydell Press, 2001. x, 205 pp.

Reviewed by Richard Will

As Simon P. Keefe's book begins, the German pedagogue Heinrich Christoph Koch is defending the concerto from his usual authority on aesthetic values, the *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (1771-74) of Johann Georg Sulzer. The *Theorie* complained that "the concerto appears to have more the purpose of giving a skillful player the opportunity to be heard . . . than to be used for the rendering of passions," a stern judgment given Sulzer's conviction that expressing emotion was tantamount to a moral responsibility in the arts (quoted in Koch 1983:209). Koch countered by imagining soloist and accompaniment as partners in a "passionate dialogue," in which the soloist "expresses his feelings to the orchestra, and it signals him through short interspersed phrases sometimes approval, sometimes acceptance of his expression . . . by a concerto I imagine something similar to the tragedy of the ancients, where the actor expressed his feelings not towards the pit, but to the chorus" (quoted in Keefe, 17-18). While not always agreeing that what soloist and orchestra share are feelings, many subsequent writers would echo Koch's description of the concerto as conversation or drama. No works have been more affected than his ideal, the concertos of Mozart.¹

Most comparisons are like Koch's in that they remain general; even Donald Francis Tovey, who also evokes classical plays and, in a much-quoted phrase, the "ancient and universal experience . . . [of] the antithesis of the individual and the crowd" (1936:6), does not explain how social oppositions are worked out in particular concertos, but instead uses the metaphors to illuminate the whole genre (cf. Webster 1996:107-9). Keefe seeks to fill in the details. Focusing on the piano concertos from K. 271 in E \flat (1777) to K. 595 in B \flat (1791), he examines "the interactive relationship between the piano and the orchestra" (1) as a compositional practice with its own history and significance. When and how does Mozart make soloist and accompaniment "converse"? How do they get along when they do? Do their dialogues change with the years? An original critical approach, designed with such questions in mind, leads Keefe to argue that solo-orchestra relations grow increasingly complex in the concertos of the 1780s, culminating in K. 491 in C minor (1786). At the same time—and equally important, in his view—the partnerships remain harmonious. Mozart's or-

chestra may not be so compliant as Koch's, which always accepts and approves, but where conflict arises, resolution awaits.

Keefe's methodology draws inspiration from the *Traité de mélodie* (1814) and *Art du compositeur dramatique* (1833) of Antoine Reicha, which clarify the nuts and bolts of dialogue in music (Keefe, 24–34). Where earlier writers, like Rousseau, speak simply of “two voices or two instruments which answer one another, and which often unite,” Reicha outlines types of alternation (e.g., of complete periods, phrases, or motives), formal plans for distributing alternation and unification, and ways of distinguishing “people of different character or with different feelings.” Following Reicha, Keefe assumes that conversants speak in turn, and he concentrates on passages in which the piano, tutti, orchestral sections, or orchestral soloists exchange successive statements (37–38). The examples demonstrate all of Reicha's types of alternation and more, and also the representation of conflict through harmonic, dynamic, and other contrasts catalogued in the *Art du compositeur dramatique*. As for how the exchanges between instruments develop, within works and over time, Keefe goes beyond Reicha to create new critical categories suitable specifically to Mozart's concertos, the most important of which is a dramatic trajectory he calls “reinforced co-operation.” It is evident above all in first movements:

In the solo exposition, the piano and the orchestra engage in intimate dialogue that bonds rather than separates the two forces; in the development, they either partake in dialogue among themselves (internal dialogue), move away from dialogue all together, or engage in confrontational dialogue . . . and in the recapitulation, they re-establish the intimate dialogue of the solo exposition, often adding dialogic subtleties not included in the earlier section. (75)

Thus in the first movement of K. 449 in E \flat , a particularly clear example, relations are harmonious in the exposition as the soloist takes up the principal themes presented in the orchestral ritornello, and the two parties repeatedly exchange imitative or complementary statements. Once into the development, they lapse into “contrasting dialogue” in Reicha's sense, “abrasive” unisons in the orchestra alternating with arpeggios in the piano (mm. 188–203). The later juncture between retransition and recapitulation is also “jarring . . . extremely abrupt,” for “the piano ascends chromatically [from the dominant] in all three lines (bars 230–33) leading directly to the return of the main theme in the tonic (bar 234).” Reconciliation is then effected by the consequent of the main theme, which is played, as it had been in the solo exposition, by the piano alone with an accompa-

niment of chromatically rising thirds (m. 242; cf. m. 97). "The formerly disruptive semitone ascent is, therefore, instantly assimilated as a cooperative element," and the moment satisfies structural exigencies as well, since "first-movement concerto form requires two expositions to 'come together' in a single recapitulation" (64–67).

In Keefe's judgment, all but a few of Mozart's first movements follow a similar path of solo-orchestra relations, and several rely on the same conflation of previously separate orchestral and solo statements to produce new cooperative dialogue in their recapitulations (93). The first movement of K. 491 represents a "dialogic apotheosis" in the number and variety of instrumental exchanges, the intensity of its famous development-section confrontation, and what Keefe sees as the symmetrical arrangement of the dialogues in the two expositions as well as the recapitulation (80–94). Second and third movements continue along the same lines, often "by reshaping and transforming earlier dialogic procedures" (149): in K. 488 in A, the tendency of the first two movements to connect antecedents and consequents with dialogued "segues," a technique discussed by Koch (Keefe, 36–37), and to treat principal themes in alternation between soloist and orchestra (if not in the expositions then in the recapitulations) finds echo in the long series of thematic dialogues in the concluding rondo (161–64, 171). These and other resemblances across the movement cycles emphasize the achievement of harmony in the first movements, which is often further confirmed in the last movements by a "final climactic section in which the piano and orchestra demonstrate dialogic co-operation in a free, uninhibited fashion" (174). A classic instance is the $\frac{3}{8}$ coda of K. 449, whose straightforward back-and-forth between piano and orchestra continues right up to the final chords (176).

The close readings that substantiate Keefe's thesis, comprising about two-thirds of the book, bring fresh perspective to dozens of movements. He uncovers cyclical relationships and shows the care with which Mozart contrasts or coordinates the forces; "cooperative" exchanges, for instance, are made so not simply by the alternation of like material but by many short- and long-range pitch, motivic, and rhythmic connections, which Keefe demonstrates (80–94 et passim). Moreover, while his topics do not include orchestration as such, his approach naturally draws attention to it, whether it is Mozart's exploitation of each possible pairing of piano, strings, and winds in the development section of the first movement of K. 503 in C (94), or the importance of timbral combinations in articulating the especially complex form of the first movement of K. 491 (80–94). Taking dialogue seriously reveals much more about Mozart's concertos than its long but casual use as a metaphor would lead one to suspect.

Dialogue might reveal still more were it construed less narrowly. Al-

though consistent with Reicha, restricting the investigation to successive alternations between instruments leaves out of account at least two events that seem crucial for the relationship between solo and orchestra. The first is the cadenza. Keefe sees Mozart's own written-out cadenza for K. 449 as resolving a conflict late in the first movement (66), but otherwise he does not treat cadenzas as part of the solo/orchestra interchange. Needless to say, the absence of cadenzas by Mozart for six of the concertos (66, n. 5; see also p. 6) poses an obstacle that is greatly compounded by the likelihood that he and other performers would have embellished written-out texts—when they did not improvise the entire passage. Yet given Keefe's thesis, that the instruments progress toward cooperation, the question of how cadenzas influence the outcome is vital. Other than in K. 449, the first movements are shown as having resolved their conflicts before the cadential fermata. Do Mozart's written cadenzas—which give an idea, at least, of what he deemed appropriate—confirm the resolution, perhaps combining with the concluding *tutti* to create one last cooperative exchange? Or do they cause new tension? The balance achieved in a recapitulation by, for instance, dividing thematic antecedents and consequents between the players will be lost if the soloist uses the cadenza to emphasize the idiosyncrasy of a voice that is already "first among equals."² For "reinforced cooperation" to be preserved in such a case, the burden of reunification must at the very least be shifted to the remaining movements. Or perhaps Keefe's model of cooperation, based as it is on contemporary aesthetics and detailed readings of the works, could itself be called upon to clarify what counts as appropriate in an improvised cadenza (and in concerto performance generally, which Keefe does not address but which surely also affects the shape of dialogue). Intangible as they are, cadenzas have too many ramifications in this context to be ignored.

Equally deserving of attention are passages in which solo and orchestra play different music at the same time, and in such a way that neither is clearly "main voice" nor "accompaniment." Particularly suggestive is Mozart's frequent pairing of "internal dialogue" in the orchestra with virtuosic figuration in the piano. Midway through the finale of K. 451 in D, wind soloists state the opening of the main theme three times in succession, answered in each case by a piano arpeggio that modulates to a new key (mm. 172–89). The pattern changes when the oboe plays the first two measures of the theme simultaneously with the third entrance of the piano (mm. 188–89), and thereafter the oboe and flute continue to trade the thematic incipit while the piano arpeggiates around them (mm. 190–99).

For Keefe, the piano "flourishes" in these measures "prohibit additional dialogue" (152), but I hear instead a different kind of dialogue, less

formal and more fluid than the preceding. In speaking, perhaps, each voice must wait its turn in order to create dialogue “in the meaningful sense of one interlocutor reacting to the words of another as opposed to making a statement oblivious to whatever else is said” (38). But why should this be true of music, with its unique ability to combine voices contrapuntally? The characters in Mozart’s operatic ensembles often express themselves simultaneously while continuing to interact with others onstage, and concerto agents ought to have the same powers. The piano and woodwinds in K. 451 could be thought of as entering into a faster-paced discussion—Cuthbert Girdlestone called it a “game” (1952:235–36)—that leads the main theme through numerous keys and ends, significantly, in an alternating exchange preparing a joint reprise of the main theme by the piano and strings (mm. 206–14). In other words, in what seems a natural and dramatically nuanced progression, the relationship between the parties intensifies just before they return to collaborating. Similar textures occur at quite different structural and psychological moments (in K. 491, for instance, before the confrontation in the first movement, mm. 309–24), and it is worth pondering how all of them affect their protagonists’ dealings with one another.

Keefe elaborates the literary metaphor proposed by Koch, ancient tragedy, with examples drawn from eighteenth-century neoclassical drama and dramatic theory. Occasionally Mozart’s works suggest more or less specific parallels in contemporary plays—for example, when the characters of Voltaire, Lessing, or Goethe trace contours of agreement and disagreement reminiscent of the concertos (69–72), or confront one another using the rhetorical device of *stichomythia*, a dialogue of short alternating phrases in which the participants typically repeat and reinterpret one another’s words (51–56). More often, the concertos embody the general precepts of neoclassical theory by “eschewing abrupt relational transformation in favour of carefully crafted, stage-by-stage relational development” (179). The gradual unfolding of the characters’ attitudes takes precedence over plot twists and even over results. Lessing wrote of Euripides that he “deliberately let his spectators know as much of the coming action as any god might know, . . . [promising] to awaken their emotions, not so much by that which should occur, as by the mode in which it should occur” (quoted in Keefe, 73). Keefe argues likewise that “since the eventual outcome of Mozart’s relational drama is not really in doubt . . . the listener can turn his or her attention exclusively to interactive processes” (149). For the audience, following concerto dialogue, like watching a play, requires intense concentration, and the effort gives access to the social meanings of the genre and to an ethical dimension it shares with the theater: “By engaging his listener in a challenging intellectual pursuit, Mozart offered him or

her an excellent vehicle for learning about co-operation . . . a value deeply cherished in the Age of Enlightenment. Mozart's concertos thus fulfilled the single most important requirement for all late eighteenth-century music and drama: the general instruction of the listener/spectator" (73–74). What Koch only implied with his metaphor, Keefe delivers by showing how Mozart's dramatic dialogues justify the concertos in terms acceptable to eighteenth-century aesthetics.

Koch would be perplexed, though, by Keefe's reluctance to discuss what Sulzer called "the rendering of passions," whose purported absence from concertos inspired Koch to mount his defense. Although the concerto protagonists identified by Keefe live through confrontation and co-operation, the emotional overtones of which are sometimes recognized in descriptions of "relational unease" (72) or "joyous affirmation" (171), most of their interactions are analyzed independently of emotional and indeed of all semantic associations. Difficult as those are to discuss in instrumental music, setting them aside puts Keefe at odds with his eighteenth-century authorities and disregards evidence that could enrich the book's interpretations, as becomes especially evident in the chapter comparing the concertos to Mozart's operas. Keefe argues persuasively that the composer's technique of instrumental, vocal, and vocal-instrumental dialogue develops continuously from *Idomeneo* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* through the concertos and into *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. Similarities can be very striking, for example, between the second movement of K. 459 in F and the duet "Che soave zeffiretto" from Act 3 of *Figaro*. Both forego developmental middle parts to "move immediately from establishing intimate relations between the characters in the initial sections, to reinforcing intimate relations in the recapitulation and 'reprise' sections"; both employ Kochian segues to comparable effect; and both end with "dialogic intensification," in which previously segregated themes and phrases are newly shared. In dramatic terms, the duet also offers a good analogy for Keefe's reading of K. 459 and of the concertos generally, for it enacts musically the cooperation of Susanna and the Countess in their effort to dupe the Count (132–36).

Yet Keefe passes over one of the most suggestive resemblances when he recognizes the "pastoral atmosphere" of the duet but not that of the concerto movement. Both are allegrettos in $\frac{3}{8}$ characterized by prominent woodwinds and by the undulating inner voices found throughout eighteenth-century idyllic music (see the violins throughout the duet, and in the concerto mm. 10–14, 44–51 and elsewhere). If the concerto seems more elevated in style, thanks to a greater variety of mood and more rhythmic and harmonic sophistication, its scenic associations are strengthened by alternating sixteenth-note scales in the second group and coda (see

especially mm. 106–10 and 150–59), which have a close counterpart in another, manifestly pastoral number from *Figaro*, Susanna's aria "Deh vieni" (Webster 1996:122–23). Since the pastoral garden is where the conflicts of *Figaro* resolve, recognizing that the concerto evokes a related setting would strengthen Keefe's claim that the instruments work toward ever greater unity. It would also help distinguish their "intimate relations" from those found elsewhere. The idyll of K. 459 follows an allegro full of march rhythms, giving the impression, by virtue of the conventional associations of each style, that it removes the players from a comparatively active, public, masculine, and aristocratic world into one more sentimental, private, feminine, and socially middling or neutral. The ensuing relationship differs significantly from, say, the comparably intimate union discussed by Keefe in the second movement of K. 449 (131–32), whose long legato melodies and syncopated rhythms suggest a dialogue at once more effusive and less complacent than in K. 459, and which follow, not a march-oriented movement, but an allegro in triple meter combining lyricism with dramatic unisons and shifts to the minor. In one case the solo and orchestra seem to play with social identities as they go from movement to movement, in the other, to explore a succession of moods marked by internal contrast. The expressive difference may be open to other readings, but ignoring it obscures a large part of what makes each dialogue unique.

Equally important, references to social standing, gender, temperament, or physical movement (e.g., marching) suggest that the concertos' "general instruction of the listener" goes beyond the enactment of cooperation. A concerto cannot be so specific as the dialogues Keefe quotes from Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779), in which characters of different faiths work toward religious tolerance. Still, it can endow its forces with enough personality and atmosphere to make their interchange convey more than simply the value of agreement, per se—to give only one example, it must say something about Mozart's notion of how and where agreement is best reached, and by whom, that his players nearly always finish their transaction by sharing dance rhythms in the finale.

Keefe also pays insufficient attention to two concertos that do not obviously endorse cooperation at all, K. 491 and K. 466 in D minor. Long singled out for their uncharacteristically dark moods (for sample comments, see 78–79), the works are seen by Joseph Kerman as upsetting the normal "sequence" of solo-orchestra relations in Mozart, which in his terms progress "from interaction to some sort of respite to complicity" (1994:329–30). Disruptive events include the soloists' initial entrances with new themes rather than the first themes of the preceding orchestral ritornellos; the orchestra's inability to repeat fully the "explosive" theme of the finale of K. 466; the piano's "haunting" of the tutti after the first-movement cadenza

of K. 491; and its “monopolizing” of the final variation and coda of the finale of the same work (Kerman 1994:330–32; 1999:105–11). Keefe argues unconvincingly that motivic connections between the soloist’s first-movement entrance and the preceding ritornello in K. 466 “integrate the solo piano smoothly into the movement” (82): the connections are evident, but they hardly diminish the shock of hearing the soloist refuse to begin with the orchestra’s opening theme. (The gesture is at least as confrontational as the “flamboyant” opening solo of K. 450 in B \flat , which he sees as causing “relational tension” [56–64].) Regarding K. 491, he discusses neither the piano’s first-movement entrance nor its return after the cadenza. More serious, he does not consider the second or third movements of either concerto, an omission made all the more troubling by his analysis of the first movement of K. 491 as Mozart’s “dialogic apotheosis.” Do solo-orchestra negotiations simply break down in the finale, which ends in the minor (the only concerto to do so) and with the piano, as Kerman says, relegating the orchestra almost entirely to the background? Or is cooperation redeemed in some unexplained way—and if so, what is the nature of reconciliation when its medium is a gloomy march rather than the usual bright dance? Keefe dismisses Kerman’s contention that K. 491 dramatizes a breach between Mozart (represented by the soloist) and his audience (the orchestra), but offers only the first movement as proof (98). Nor does he address the disputed major-mode coda of K. 466, which Kerman hears as a “deflection” overshadowed by earlier turbulence, but Wye Jamison Allanbrook reads as a genuine “comic outcome” (1994:184–86; 1996:99–101). Presumably Keefe would agree with the latter, but the triumph of cooperation needs to be demonstrated in this most rancorous of all the finales, and the question asked how such a last-minute resolution differs, formally and expressively, from agreements established earlier and maintained longer in other finales.

Koch may have wanted to imply that the characters and outcomes available to concertos were numerous, for where Sulzer wrote only of virtuosos showing off, Koch populated the genre with actors, whose metier is to portray different personalities and experiences. Keefe demonstrates that Mozart preferred characters who resolve the tensions that separate them, and he elucidates the syntax of the resulting dialogues with a precision greatly surpassing that of any previous author. Extending Koch’s insights further will mean asking more about who Mozart’s conversants are, and what their interactions may embody other than, or in addition to, idealized social harmony. It would be surprising were the formal ingenuity so thoroughly illustrated by Keefe not matched by a comparable richness of expression in these works. If Mozart’s concertos continue to engage scholars, performers, and listeners, it is because they probe human relation-

ships with the same subtlety as the ancient tragedies that were Koch's point of comparison.

Notes

1. In volume 3 of the *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition* (1793), Koch cites C. P. E. Bach's concertos as exemplary. The article on concertos in his *Musikalisches Lexikon* (1802) takes over much of the earlier discussion but refers instead to Mozart. See Keefe, 21.

2. In this connection, the recent formulation of Joseph Kerman is suggestive: "In the Classical concerto, the distention of cadential energy that is promoted by the cadenza is, at the very least, unclassical—to say nothing of the license granted by improvisation, the license to break with tempo and rhythm, recall themes, make modulations . . . From the standpoint of musical discourse, the cadenza is a disruption, a poltergeist in the stately home of Classical music" (1999:72).

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