

Humble River, for Flute, Violin, Viola, Cello (1997) commissioned by The Rotterdamse Kunstichting for Leonore Pameijer and friends, Boosey & Hawkes 1998. (32')

Humble River Program Note

Dutch flutist Eleonore Pameijer, after hearing some of my music and correctly concluding that I am sympathetic to Mozart, presented me with an interesting opportunity. The four Mozart Flute Quartets combine to be about twenty-five minutes short of a full concert. She asked me if I would compose the music to complete the evening.

My approach was to write a single, continuous piece which would flow throughout the evening: a “river” with Mozart “islands.” Each part of Humble River picks up from where the previous part left off, (except for the Prelude - a musical fragment which is not continued in Part I and, in fact, introduces the Mozart Flute Quartet in A major as much as it does Part 1 of Humble River).

The obvious question is: What relation, if any, does Humble River have to the Mozart Quartets? There are no direct quotes, but I do make abstract references to the sound and energy of (what I would call) voice leading ticks: parallel thirds, suspensions, inner voice patterns, major/minor color moves, et cetera - “stuff” with no thematic profile, but an idiosyncratic flavor nonetheless. The sound of the flute doubling the violin at an upper octave would be in this category, but it is a sound that is so attached, in my mind, to particular tunes from the Mozart Quartets that I had to resist. More important than these details is the larger interplay between the two musics.

The Mozart Flute Quartets represent some of the most shamelessly optimistic music ever written. I admire Mozart’s ability to launch an exuberant melody with a big toothy smile or one that suggests a reflection on simple, natural beauty. These are not affects that come easily to our post-Hiroshima, post-Fruedian age and I wanted to use the tension between the two sensibilities.

My Prelude approaches the ensemble as if it were a collection of broken toys. Mozart’s Quartet in A Major discovers that they are not broken at all, and introduces the instruments one by one with beautiful melodic variations. From here on, a single theme is played out several times in the alternation of Mozart and Mackey: Humble River responds to the Flute Quartet’s enthusiastic invitations to sing. In Part 1, the violin and viola huddle, hum and mumble together in the mid-register. Neither dares to distinguish itself as a melodic voice, as if too shy to sing in Mozart’s presence. The melodic shapes that do emerge are the result of the composite of the two instruments locked in small, close intervals, characteristic of the interior movement of inner voices. Even as the tessitura expands and, in Part 2, the texture grows with the addition of the cello and flute, the ensemble does not find a solo melodic voice but, rather, amplifies a communal inner voice. Humble River makes some frustrated attempts to squeeze a melody out of the ensemble but eventually realizes that its destiny lies elsewhere; in the end, Part 4 does answer Mozart’s exuberance, but with movement and sound rather than song.

Humble River can also be performed continuously, without comment from Mozart. I imagine one would gain a clearer sense of the overall evolution from repressed

to ecstatic, from modest spring to raging rapids and sea of sound. But one would lose the intermediate tensions resulting from the interleaving of the two worlds of experience.

-- Steven Mackey