A MINUET

by

Giovanni Battista Somis

Opus 6, no. 4, mvt. 3, Paris, 1734

Riepel argued that large works in the galant style—movements from sonatas, symphonies, concertos—were nothing more than expanded minuets. While there was some rhetorical exaggeration in his claim, there is also a large measure of truth. Many of the skills needed to write a good minuet could be adapted to the requirements of larger pieces. The same general sequence of schemata used in a minuet could be used in a large movement, though with other schemata added and interpolated. And if one could not write a good minuet, there was little point in attempting a larger format. Riepel’s point is further borne out by our records of eighteenth-century German instruction in composition. Thomas Attwood’s lessons with Mozart, for example, show that systematic training neared its end with assignments to write minuets. After students had successfully dealt with the minuet, they could be expected to work on their own to emulate the larger compositions of master musicians.

Only a few schemata are necessary to form a minuet, since its small size precludes more than a handful of musical phrases. A minuet by Giovanni Battista Somis (1686–1763), a master violinist whose family long served the court of Savoy at Turin, employs little beyond the Romanesca, the Prinner, and the Fonte, and so serves as a useful introduction to these schemata in their native habitat. An outline on the following page details how Somis organized his minuet. Its three columns list, respectively, the minuet’s two sections (the terms “first half” and “second half” are used approximately), the various schemata and cadences in the order deployed, and the series of local keys with their modulations. The abbreviation “C ➔ G” means “a move from the key of C major to G major.” Because each half of a minuet is repeated in performance, the term “double-reprise form” is perhaps the best modern label for the minuet’s overall design.
The following musical example—one of the most prevalent melodic clichés in the galant style—can be heard in measures 7–8 of Somis’s minuet:

**ex. 5.1 The High \( \oplus \) Drop**

This figure, which I term “the High \( \oplus \) Drop” on account of its distinctive contour, served as a conventional sign of impending closure. It was featured in several of the Prinners already presented in chapter 3 and will be found in numerous examples in the chapters ahead.

Among the minuet’s other commonplaces are (1) the matching of a two-bar Romanesca with a two-bar Prinner riposte, and (2) the appearance of a Fonte immediately following the double bar. Less common are the use of the modulating Prinner to end the first half (a Prinner rarely furnishes a strong cadence by itself) and the use of rising figures in the Fonte melody (which I assume to be in imitation of the minuet’s opening melody). Because danceable minuets needed to maintain an even number of measures overall (as mentioned in chapter 4, the basic step required six beats to complete), the “odd,” single measure used to set up the temporary move to F major (m. 13) is “evened” out by the final, three-measure hemiola cadence (mm. 18–20). It is sometimes argued that because no one danced to a minuet embedded within nondance movements, it makes no difference whether there is an odd or even number of measures. Riepel, however, maintained that producing a minuet with an odd number of measures was a mistake. He noted that while an even number of measures was more pleasing in most cases, it was “especially required
for a minuet.” The reader may notice that the “odd” measure 13 is not shown as part of a larger schema. The goal here is not to force every note into a rigid framework of phrase schemata. Measure 13 clearly leads into measure 14, but that connection is based on different, localized factors.

Somis, like Wodiczka, provided a set of melodic variations on his minuet. In the rendering provided on the World Wide Web, inspired by a recorded performance by Enrico Gatti, one can hear all the variations. No score of the variations is provided. Yet because the same bass and the same schemata recur in each variation, it should be possible to follow the course of the variations aurally with the same confidence and satisfaction that was so important to the experience of a galant patron. As in many galant sets of variations, the bass plays the supporting role while the melody adds new “diminutions” to each variation. The quarter notes of the theme are first “diminished” into eighths, then into triplet eighths, and finally into sixteenth notes. At the end, the theme returns “undiminished” to be lightly ornamented as the performer sees fit. This overall plan of increasingly bravura performance followed by return and relaxation was easily understood and remained remarkably stable for the entire century. Not only did it provide a stage for the performer to display his or her powers in a series of different tableaus, but it also took the listener on a journey from a simple tune through incrementally more abstracted schemata to the tune again, now heard as the central tendency of a range of decorative potentialities.

Like Wodiczka, Somis began his career as a violinist in a ducal orchestra, and he too was sent by his patron to an Italian maestro to perfect his art. For Somis, that maestro was Corelli in Rome. Returning from Rome late in 1706, Somis embarked on a career that not only brought him to musical supremacy at the Savoy court in Turin but also took him to Paris for important concerts. His first opus appeared there in 1717, dedicated to the Duchess of Savoy, Maria. Of necessity courtiers had to write fawning dedications to their patrons, and Somis was no exception. I will omit the most obsequious passages addressed to “that august name acclaimed in all the courts.” But Somis’s list of praiseworthy attributes is worth quoting, given the assertion that through musical notation he could “present to all the world a symbolic portrait” of his patron’s “glorious qualities.”

In these my high and low notes, these acute and grave tones artfully reduced from contrariety and opposition to harmony and consonance, anyone will find certain virtues which by their nature seem opposed, yet in your person they unite in miraculous temperament and perfect concord; he will see highest majesty conjoined with highest sweetness, an affable reserve, a joyful and serene gravity, in sum a consort [concerto] of grandeur and intimacy, of moderation and splendor, of authority and gracious deference.

Whether or not any patron could live up to these ideals, the mention of galant traits like sweetness, intimacy, moderation, and deference hint at the changing fashions in Paris associated with the passing of Louis XIV and the accession of the boy Louis XV (1715). In learning to fashion “musical portraits” for this new type of affable regency patron, Somis assured himself of continued courtly favor for decades to come.
ex. 5.2 Somis, Opus 6, no. 4, mvt. 3, Minuet (Paris, 1734)