

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Mozart Quartet K. 387

Mozart's wrote his String Quartet in G, K. 387, late in 1782, when he was 26 and a newcomer to Vienna's musical scene. The Quartet is the first of a set of six quartets that Mozart dedicated to Joseph Haydn. Mozart appreciated that Haydn had elevated the string quartet into a great art form with his own quartets, making the four parts more completely individual and enriching the form's expressive possibilities with his genius and innovation. Although Mozart had written several earlier quartets, these six were the first ones he composed after becoming closely acquainted with Haydn's work, and the transformation is unmistakable: the movements are expanded in their structure, the polyphonic textures are more daring and complex, and the ideas behind the writing are more subtle and profound. When Haydn eventually heard a performance of three of these quartets, he made his famous comment to Mozart's father, Leopold: "Before God and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste and, what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition."

The Quartet's first movement is warmly lyrical. The movement's textures and moods are subtly variable; but what gives the movement its stamp is Mozart's signature ability to extend a phrase, to spin it out beyond its expected endpoint, so that the music acquires a gently rhetorical cadence, without stiffness or formality. Especially notable is the middle (development) section, where various individual instruments take turns breaking loose from the texture, wandering away and musing on alternative harmonic possibilities.

The second movement, a Minuet, is one that Haydn must have especially appreciated, as it incorporates a favorite Haydn trick: refusing to cooperate with the dance's triple meter. At the opening, the accompanimental chords appear only on third beats, rather than on the usual, stable downbeats; and immediately thereafter the first violin embarks on a strange, hiccuping chromatic pattern that has accents on every other beat, again defying the expected rhythm. Contrasting with this whimsical, humorous mood, the Trio section is in a minor key, and alternates stern unison utterances with more wistful replies.

Next comes the slow movement, extraordinary even for Mozart, a kind of dramatic aria for quartet. Although it is richly contrapuntal in many places, making use of dark chromatic motion and suspension, the movement's essential focus is on the first violin part, which sometimes sings deeply in lower registers, and sometimes floats effortlessly into the higher reaches with

delicate figurations. There is a sense that the composer is communicating something more than usually intimate, a personal avowal.

The Finale is amazing in a different way. In this lively, mock-fugal setting, we hear four-part counterpoint taken to extremes, prefiguring in a sense the Finale to the “Jupiter” Symphony. The innocuous theme, a smooth five-note figure, is gradually surrounded with delicate, teasing syncopes and suspensions as each new voice enters. The movement’s hopping second theme, introduced by the cello, receives a similar fugal treatment, as the other instruments take turns piling on. Now soft and teasing, now bright and celebratory, the movement is a contrapuntal romp, filled with unexpected moments right up to its improbably simple conclusion.

Note by Misha Amory