

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Mozart Quartet K. 589

Mozart composed his B-flat Quartet, K. 589, in the spring of 1790, the year before he died. This quartet and its companion works, K. 575 and K. 590, are often referred to as the “Prussian” Quartets, based on Mozart’s intention to dedicate them to the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II. Until recently it was assumed that the King had actually commissioned these quartets – Mozart wrote only three of a planned set of six – but recent scholarship suggests that this was wishful thinking on Mozart’s part. Deeply in debt, he probably composed them on speculation, hoping to be rewarded after the fact by a happy royal recipient. Friedrich Wilhelm was an enthusiastic amateur cellist, and accordingly the cello is often the featured soloist in these three quartets, as Mozart strove to capture the King’s fancy.

We are accustomed to thinking of Mozart as the effortless genius, from whose brain great works of music sprang fully formed. In reality, it is evident that his later quartets gave him a fair amount of trouble: the six great quartets that he dedicated to Haydn had their early drafts and their false starts, and the “Prussian” Quartets were a project of several months’ duration, which he at one point referred to as “that exhausting labor.”

Despite his feelings about his last three quartets, there is nothing laborious in the atmosphere of the music itself. The six “Haydn” Quartets, which date from several years before, bear the marks of rich effort and inventiveness, and they astonish with their contrapuntal complexity and ambitious means of expression. In these later quartets, the air is far more transparent, the message more simply stated. In the case of the B-flat Quartet, the four-movement format has a compact, streamlined quality; there is no one movement that claims to be the weighty center of the piece. The textures favor homophony (melody in one voice, simple accompaniment in the others) more often, although contrapuntal passages still abound. And if Mozart does not entirely avoid the rich, chromatic harmony of many of his mature works, he seems to favor simplicity in his harmonic language as well.

The first movement is an airy sonata form, starting up high in the upper voices, and waiting a few bars before introducing the cello’s voice, which is prominently featured throughout the exposition. Triplets, appearing early on, proceed to dominate the rhythmic texture, imparting a nimble motion to the music. Despite a shadowy journey through remote keys in the central development section, the movement remains essentially blithe throughout its compact form, unencumbered by a coda or any other structural “extra”.

The second movement opens with a lovely cantilena for the cello, with a simple accompaniment; it is hard to imagine a more perfect showcase for this instrument's lyrical upper register. After this melody is echoed by the first violin, swirling sixteenth-note figurations carry the music to a different key and to the other melodic idea of the movement, a grave and elegant statement passed between first violin and cello. The movement as a whole evokes the composer's finest love arias from Figaro and The Magic Flute.

The minuet movement is a stately dance, which attempts to proceed with dignity, but is chuckled at by sixteenth-notes in the lower instruments, first loudly in the cello and then softly in the viola. Eventually the sixteenth-note motion pervades the entire texture, with some brilliant first-violin passages leading up to a tongue-in-cheek conclusion in the viola part. The contrasting Trio section is actually longer than the main section, and contains the most elaborate music of the quartet. Characterized by a rapid bariolage figure that starts in the second violin and is passed around the group, this section is a sonic collage, with bits of melody overlaid on top of a busy contrapuntal exchange.

The finale is a lighthearted, graceful movement whose main idea is like a game of leapfrog, always echoed at half a bar's distance. Other manifestations of fun are a hopping figure that plays with the meter, changing it from 6-8 to 3-4, and frequent sudden dynamic changes. The movement recalls distantly the first movement of the "Hunt" Quartet in its meter, key, and exuberance, but this movement is a lighter traveler, remaining true to its own quartet in its agile motion, its lean form and its economy of means. The ending is a Mozartean signature: a strong, assertive phrase answered by a witty, quiet rejoinder.

Note by Misha Amory