

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Mozart Quintet K. 174

Mozart wrote his first Viola Quintet, K. 174, in December 1773, when he was barely seventeen years old. Probably the very earliest works for which he is enduringly remembered date from around this time; his 25th (g minor) and 29th (A major) symphonies were written in 1773-4, his motet “Exsultate, jubilate” in 1773, and the violin concertos were all composed in 1775. At this time the viola quintet as a form was in its infancy; Mozart may have written this work as a response, or reaction, to a group of viola quintets composed by Michael Haydn, Joseph’s brother and Mozart’s good friend. In a larger sense, classical-period chamber music had barely begun to emerge from its role as light entertainment, and to be treated as a serious expressive medium: Joseph Haydn composed his first great string quartets, opus 20, between 1772 and 1774, and Mozart’s first quartet masterpiece would not be written until nine years later.

This viola quintet, on the one hand, bears the stamp of a light, genial divertimento; on the other hand one senses a brilliant young composer just starting to test his wings, to investigate his own potential for surprise and innovation. Consider the opening melody: cheerful and pleasant, it has its head bitten off after a few bars by a brusque tutti retort; after this, the first violin more tentatively finds its way to a more natural cadence, but that moment is simultaneously the re-launching of this melody, this time in the first viola. This dovetailing of beginning and end, which was to become a hallmark of Mozart’s technique, is an effect we can too easily take for granted; in the hands of a duller composer, this moment would be padded out with an extra bar of filler to make the phrases more regular. Other striking moments in this movement include an absolute silence after the second theme, followed by ominous octaves in the lower voices, and a gradual, difficult return to a sunnier climate; and the teasing dialogue between the first violin and the supporting voices at the end of the exposition.

The slow movement is solemn and lovely, and is distinguished by the use of mutes and by a simple idea played in unison – first it is the melody, then it becomes the gentle accompaniment for a more expressive melody in the first violin. Especially noteworthy in this movement is a sudden, anguished outbreak in the second half of the movement, which leads through a series of contorted suspensions before the music finds its way back to the moment of return.

The last two movements seem to have been more effortful in the writing, for we have earlier, rejected versions both for the Trio section of the Minuet, and for

the entire Finale. In both cases, the replacement is a more successful and sophisticated composition; in the case of the Trio, the quintet divides up into a bright, strong group which is echoed teasingly by a shadow group. In the Finale, we have an especially interesting glimpse into Mozart's creative process: the bravura figure that opens the movement in the first draft survives in the final version, but is "demoted" to the role of a later transitional idea, and a more innocent, tripping melody becomes the first theme. This movement has an unusual number of carefree melodic ideas, and underscores more than the other movements the divertimento-like quality of the work as a whole.

Note by Misha Amory