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Mozart Quintet, K. 515

Mozart's C major Viola Quintet is among the very greatest of his chamber music masterpieces. The possibilities of adding one extra voice to a string quartet clearly interested the composer in his late years, perhaps because of the increase in contrapuntal opportunity, perhaps because Mozart himself played the viola; in any case, he wrote four major works for viola quintet during this period, and established the genre for posterity. The C major Quintet was composed in the spring of 1787, along with its counterpart, the darkly tragic G minor Quintet; it shows the composer at the height of his mature period, able to call into being music whose smooth surface masks the depth of invention and complexity lying beneath.

The first movement celebrates instantly the "five-ness" of the quintet with an idea that progresses in five-bar periods, keeping to this pattern for quite a while; this not only creates a wonderful, persistent asymmetry, but augurs the entire work's commitment to surprising and irregular phrase lengths. This first idea, where the first violin answers a rising question in the cello, is destined to undergo various rhetorical shifts: first it will come to an abrupt halt, with a silence, then the two instruments reverse their roles; then a short while later they will try again, only to interrupt each other one bar too early with the next question. The texture in this movement is generally simple and homophonic, with the one accompanied by the many, particularly in the first appearance of each melodic idea; but just as the ear has become used to this simplicity, the composer splits the group in countless ways: here he has five independent voices imitating one another, there he has pairs of voices offering contrasting activity, or challenging each other antiphonally. And in the central development section of the movement, he abandons simplicity altogether, exploring deeply the polyphonic possibilities of his material in a dark, troubled episode. The extensive coda, too, features complicated counterpoint among the voices, once more inviting a darker tenderness which offsets the sunny, C major qualities of the movement.

The rather blithe Minuet employs a teasing device: a melody which crescendos to a surprising subito piano, then on its second attempt attains the forte it was aiming for. This is the first of several dynamic surprises, which crop up everywhere in the movement, an *idée fixe* of sorts. The Trio, unusually, shifts to F major – modulating beyond the parallel major or minor key is uncommon for Trios of this period – and, as if aware of having strayed too far, seems often unsure of itself: instead of a flowing melody, the main idea is a hesitating two-

note motif, and the key of F major is only firmly established near the very end of the section.

The slow movement takes the form of a tender duet between the first violin and first viola, as Mozart focuses on the orchestrational symmetry of the quintet. Here we have very much the reverse of the teasing, hesitating Minuet: rather, songful continuity is the rule, and as soon as one instrument pauses for breath, the line is taken up by another. All the elements of opera aria are here, beautiful melodic contour richly adorned with ornaments and arabesques; only a text is lacking. The form is simple and without development, befitting the music's straightforward message.

In the Finale, Mozart's operatic genius again springs to mind, but now the mood is decidedly buffa. Effervescent and humorous, the five parts are sometimes united festively, sometimes scurrying about conspiratorially, handing messages back and forth. As in the first movement, the idea of a confident momentum brought to a sudden stop is explored. The material that leads to the close of the first section hiccups amusingly; then the section seems to be unable to come to a conclusion. Despite all the humor and surprise, however, the movement's strict rondo form describes an inevitable arc, so that the euphoric coda, with its glorification of the main theme's leaping thirds, seems pre-ordained.

Note by Misha Amory