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Mozart Quintet, K. 593

Mozart's D Major Quintet, K593, opens with what might be a dialogue between Virtues, a back and forth exchange between Truth and Beauty. The cello alone sets forth the position of Truth, firm and regal, yet austere, and in response the upper four instruments offer a more sensual, elegant, and beguiling response on behalf of Beauty. The conversation continues throughout the Larghetto introduction, and the cello gradually gives up some of its certainty, eventually joining the upper parts. The introduction comes to a halt in an almost teasing manner and as the Allegro begins the music becomes Haydnesque in its wit and flourish. And in fact it is easy to imagine here that Mozart is both paying tribute to and aiming to delight the older composer whom he both revered and loved and who, it turns out, is known to have played viola in a reading of the piece. The theme here is derived from the initial response of the violin in the introduction, as if to suggest that Wit and Humor are closely allied with and contained within Beauty. When the cadence arrives, the first violin remains a beat behind the others, cheeky to the end. In fact, it turns out that this very firm cadence is not enough, perhaps because of this, to close the idea and an extra, quietly jocular four bars is added to punctuate the idea more appropriately. Surprisingly, these seemingly gratuitous, tossed-in bars become vital to the spinning out of the movement's argument. Ingenuity abounds: the repeated notes that end the very first statement in the introduction completely take over the texture at times, and each of the opening phrases of the Allegro winds up interwoven with itself. The playful contrapuntal exchanges make this, in a sense, connoisseurs' music, and yet the character of elevated banter and general joie-de-vivre is easily captivating. As the music evaporates into stuttering repeated notes at what should be the end of the movement the Larghetto makes a reappearance and is further developed. The music threatens to get deeply serious, but the first phrase of the Allegro sweeps in again to toss all aside with a wink; here the loud cadence with the first violin limping behind serves to end, the "corrective" bars taken out, reminiscent of the ending of Haydn's "Joke" quartet.

The Adagio is filled with delicate grace, the main theme gently opening up to be answered by supple sighs floating downwards. These sighs then get adorned with ornaments and are accompanied by the same balletic rhythm that closes the introduction of the first movement. (The introduction turns out to contribute material to each of the other movements.) Unbidden and unexpected, a storm intrudes, with throbbing triplets in the inner voices. The first violin sings a dramatic, pained aria and the cello creates a turbulent underpinning with gasping trills. After the initial material reappears, the once

gentle sighs become infused with the energy of the storm. This leads into one of the strangest and most affecting passages in all of Mozart's output, infinitely vulnerable and fragile. The violas cling together for comfort, tenderly pulsating and gliding back toward the tonic. The other three parts seem to float by each other, three wandering spirits clinging only to hope to find their way home. Yet, as if set right by a hand invisible to mortals, once the two violins cross paths all parts find themselves together again in the security of the opening music. The coda integrates the twice-heard storm music into the general affect of the movement; the triplets and trills, once so menacing, now glisten.

Genial and clever, the theme of the Menuetto teases by seeming possibly displaced by a beat. In a movement that should dance straightforwardly in three the sense of meter is obfuscated by figures in various voices starting on each of the three beats of the measure. This disorientation is heightened by repetition of accents on the off-beats which are only corrected at the very end of the phrase. The inherent promise in this displacement is fulfilled in the second part of the dance when the theme is played in canon, the voices apart by one beat, with the second entrance now on the strong beat of the bar. The trio is almost naïve in character and hearkens back to the introduction of the first movement. The cello's earlier opening figure is expanded to become an effervescent arpeggio leaping over two and a half octaves, and the response could hardly be more charming in its plainness. Although there are tiny hints of chromaticism, the urbane wit of the Menuetto is completely absent, and the trio is, ironically, all the more humorous for it.

Although it was known for quite some time in a spurious version where its contour was altered from a chromatic descent to a zigzag pattern, the unusual, long, slippery upbeat to the theme of the last movement is integral to its character. It is derived from the first violin responses to the cello in the introduction to the first movement and gives the impression of a bird alighting upon the water, its nearly weightless landing setting off lively ripples on the surface. As in the first movement, the amiable character of the themes seems almost to belie the startling compositional craft and contrapuntal complexity of the movement. It is hard to decide whose joy might have been greater at that early reading of the piece – Mozart's at being able to flaunt his mastery and agility for Haydn, or the older master's delight at the genius before him.

Note by Mark Steinberg