

In 1789, the 33-year-old Mozart found himself in need of money and beset by creditors, as so often in his life. Accordingly, he undertook to write a set of six quartets for Friedrich Wilhelm II, the king of Prussia, whose court he had visited on a recent trip to Potsdam. It is not clear whether the king explicitly commissioned these quartets, or whether the composer was writing on spec, hoping for royal approval. In the end, he was disappointed: "I have now been forced to give away my quartets (that exhausting labor) for a mere song, simply in order to have cash on hand..." Mozart, completed only three of the planned six quartets, and it was the publisher Artaria, not the king, who got them so cheaply.

Composing these works may have been a laborious task for Mozart, but if so there is very little trace of that effort in the finished products. If anything, these quartets -- the last ones he ever wrote -- are especially notable for their clarity, elegance and transparency. Earlier quartets, especially the six dedicated to Haydn, amaze by virtue of their contrapuntal invention, intricate textures and ambitious chromatic language; with these new quartets the composer seems to want to wipe the board clean and to enter a delicate, fresh new world. With the "Haydn" Quartets he was performing to the ear of another great musical genius. With the three "Prussian" quartets he may have had the king's simpler amateur ear in mind, as well as his accomplished cello playing; the cello is a featured voice in these works.

The D major Quartet, K. 575, is the first of the threesome. The first movement opens tenderly, a rising figure singing its way above an undulating accompaniment. This melody is answered by a terser falling figure played in unison by the whole quartet, a Puckish one-liner. After only eight bars, we have already heard the two basic kinds of music in the movement: smooth, buoyant rising arpeggios, and clever, articulate falling scales. The interaction between these two elements is the main story here, playing out against background textures that are luminous, patient and often mesmerizing. If the chamber music of this period is often conversational in nature, then this movement is a standout in that regard, featuring a patient pace of exchange between the instruments that evokes, to an unusual degree, a feeling of real-life conversation among four people, with every voice given room to have its say. The only rude interruptions feature the falling scale turned upside-down, so that it becomes an impetuous rising figure; the first time, it ushers in the recapitulation of the opening music, and the second time it brings the movement to an emphatic conclusion.

The second movement, an Andante, perpetuates the essentially gentle atmosphere that dominated the first movement. There are three ideas laid out here: first a grave, stately melody, almost choral in nature; then a more delicate conversation amongst the four voices, which eventually hints at more shadowy minor regions; and finally an eloquent avowal from the first violin which is answered in kind by the cello. Once more the grave opening material returns, somewhat more elaborate than before, and with a few lovely added phrases the movement draws to a close. There is a kind of perfection in Mozart's decision not to recapitulate all three ideas, but just to revisit the first one; rather than wearing the formal attire of a thoroughly structured sonatina, the music is clad in the simple and alluring garments of a Mozartean aria.

The third movement is a genial, sunny Minuet, whose bright opening, pitched in a high register, is a vivid contrast to the low register that began the Andante. The main section of this Minuet is full of teasing gestures, and even a bit of mock melodrama, a strongly stated passage that courts a minor key briefly before the blithe return of the main idea. By contrast, the Trio section is an easy-going star turn for his majesty the Cello, who struts his stuff while politely deferred to by the other instruments.

The Finale is the most substantial movement of the piece, compositionally and structurally more involved than its predecessors. Here Mozart revisits the melody from the opening of the first movement, and makes it the subject of a more complex conversation. Whereas in the first movement the opening notes are tender and drawn out, here the same figure is sped up, providing the beginning of a friendly, spinning tune in the cello. But before long it becomes clear that the first six notes of this tune are what interests the composer most: he breaks them off and examines them as a stand-alone figure, which overlaps between voices, gets flipped on its head, and set into ascending and descending sequences. Further enriching the environment is the appearance of triplets, first as a rollicking retort in the cello part; these triplets in turn will be treated as cleverly as the six-note figure was, examined contrapuntally and passed from voice to voice. The movement is cast in a Rondo form, which means that the opening section returns repeatedly, each time embellished with a different kind of accompaniment. The extensive coda at the end leaves the impression that Mozart had not exhausted his fascination with the movement's main idea, and took his leave from it reluctantly, continuing to turn it over in his hands and his mind before finally saying goodbye with two bright chords.