

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Mozart Quintet, K. 516

1787, the year in which Mozart wrote the g-minor Quintet, K516, was marked for the composer by misfortune and frustration over his lack of success in Vienna, a relatively fallow period compositionally, and his father's serious illness. Mozart wrote to his father: "I have now made a habit of being prepared in all the affairs of life for the worst. As death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed, during the last few years, such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind, that his image is not only no longer terrifying to me, but is indeed very soothing and consoling."

Musical keys undoubtedly have strong psychological associations, and g minor for Mozart, as evidenced as well in his 40th Symphony, K550, and Piano Quartet, K478, suggests agitation, desperation, and confrontations with anguish. Later in his life it is to be the key in the Magic Flute in which Pamina sings "Ah, I feel the joy of love has gone for evermore! Never will happiness return to my heart! See, Tamino, see these tears that flow, beloved, for you alone. If you do not feel love's yearning I must seek peace in the grave."

The g-minor Quintet begins with the upper three instruments untethered by the bass, ungrounded as well, full of a restless, yet quiet agitation; the main theme is punctuated by breathless rests, precariously balanced between song and speech. And, although it reaches upward several times, it is the pain of its falling that is its most salient characteristic. An even more brooding repetition is offered in the lower three instruments, the shadow version, even more deeply inward due to the darkness of the register. Classical-period tradition leads us to expect a contrasting second theme, by rights in the relative major. However, when the second theme arrives here the music remains in the tonic g-minor at first, boxed-in, without relief. Although the theme does eventually find its way toward B-flat Major, we can no longer trust the sense of opening up, tainted as it is by its initial failure to escape. This theme also has an interesting physiognomy, each of its component parts introduced by a dramatic leap upwards which then fails to take hold (accompanied by gasping repeated notes, even more unsettling than at the opening). The third of these is painfully dissonant, and yet Mozart indicates only a subdued accent on it (mfp), less a crying out than a painful, yet necessary, sense of restraint. This dissonant leap evolves into a repeated protest in the development section, eventually letting go into a long and chromatic, yet completely inevitable, sequence over a prolonged pedal point in the cello back to the opening material. The coda of the movement contains what may well be the most poignant moment of all. When

the second theme is stated now, that third, painfully dissonant leap is there no longer. There is a sense of defeat, of resignation, and the absence of protest hurts more than the struggle ever could have.

The Menuetto movement is no courtly dance, but rather a defiant proclamation. Although this type of movement is not unknown in other Mozart's works (for example, the Menuetto of the previously mentioned g-minor Symphony, or of the d-minor Quartet, K421), here violent chords on what should be a weak beat of the measure, answered by silence on the ensuing strong beats, add a sense of the terrible, of cruel and angry gods destroying the possibility of any solace in dance. When the contrasting trio arrives it is based on the closing figure of the Menuetto, an imagined alternate version of where the music might lead us. As this tender theme plays itself out in the violas at the conclusion of each part of the trio it is paired with a musical ellipsis in the violins and cello, trailing off into the realm of dreaming. Reality reappears with the return of the Menuetto and the movement ends without ceremony, quiet and bleak.

The Adagio ma non troppo shifts into E-flat Major, all the instruments muted for a translucent, silken timbre. An infinitely touching movement, it plays on the paradoxical beauty of sadness. In the poem Sorrows of the Moon from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire writes "And when she happens, in her somnolence, / to shed a secret tear that falls to earth, / some eager poet, sleep's sworn enemy, / cups his hand and catches that pale tear / which shimmers like a shard of opal there, / and hides it from the sun's eye in his heart." (Translation by Richard Howard) Here Mozart is that poet.

In a piece filled with extraordinary moments surely one of the most unexpected is the appearance of what appears at first to be another slow movement following the Adagio ma non troppo. The mutes come off the instruments, the pulsating repeated eighth notes from the opening movement return, and the first violin sings a tragic aria. It is a rhetorically rich outpouring, with the melody overlapping its own accompaniment, pauses in unexpected places, phrases extended nearly to the point of breaking. The aria goes on long enough that the listener almost gives up hope of there being any catharsis when at long last there is a reprieve, and a joyous, major-key Allegro finally arrives. We feel here the sort of rediscovery of possibility described by many who endure glimpses of the void beyond. The astute listener may recognize here themes which seem to look backward and borrow vocabulary from earlier, more troubled parts of the piece. Perhaps most telling among these is the revisitation of the second theme of the first movement, now buoyant, no longer weighed down, transformed. The change of perspective in this final movement is hard-won through examination of demons. And now, to quote Jorge Luis Borges (from a lecture on blindness), "happiness does not need to be transformed;

happiness is its own end.”

Note by Mark Steinberg