CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
"Mozart the Maverick"
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Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2020

Trio in B-flat, K.502
Wolfgang Amadè Mozart (1756-1791)

The late 18th-century fortepiano had a thin sound in its lower range. When Mozart composed for piano trio, he used the cello part to reinforce the bass. Most of the Mozart trios are thus really accompanied keyboard sonatas, with violin parts that are ornamental and cello parts that do little more than duplicate the pianist's left hand. The Trio in B-flat, composed in 1786, is one of only two Mozart trios that transcend this mold and reach the creative heights of the late Haydn trios.

The piano still dominates the texture of Mozart's B-flat trio. In many places, the right hand approaches the virtuosity of concerto figuration; however, the violin shares as an active participant in the melodic statements, and even the cello breaks occasionally from just the bass line.

Particularly rich in graceful melodies, the trio is a musical jewel. In the first movement, Mozart adapts a Haydnesque technique: deriving his second theme directly out of his first theme – and making it sound completely new! The middle *Larghetto* is a study in tasteful ornamentation, varied and elaborate but never excessive. A lighthearted rondo concludes the trio.

Mozart likely wrote K.502 for Franziska von Jacquin, one of his more gifted piano pupils; Wolfgang was good friends with her brother Gottfried.

Piano Quartet in E-flat major, K.493
Wolfgang Amadè Mozart

Considering Mozart's prolific output of chamber music, it may seem puzzling that he only composed two piano quartets. He wrote many violin sonatas, string quartets, viola quintets, divertimenti, piano trios, and dozens more works for other instrumental combinations. Why so few piano quartets?

The answer is that, in writing for keyboard, violin, viola, and violoncello, Mozart was something of a trailblazer. In the late 18th century, this combination of instruments was unusual. There are examples of earlier works for keyboard and three strings by Johann Schobert and Johann Christian Bach, but the specific grouping of what we call a piano quartet was a bold stroke on Mozart's part. His two – K.478 in G Minor (1785) and K.493 in E-flat Major (1786) –

were the first of their kind to carve a permanent niche in the repertoire. Effectively, he invented the genre.

Mozart and his publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister hedged their bet. Originally, Hoffmeister commissioned three such quartets from Mozart. When the first of them – the G minor work – was published in December 1785, the title page left the keyboard instrument to the player's choice: Quatuor pour le Clavecin ou Forte Piano, Violin, Tallie [a misprint for *taille*, French for tenor part, *i.e.*, viola] *et Basse* [bass, which in this context meant violoncello].

The fortepiano was gaining in popularity in the mid-1780s, but Mozart and Hoffmeister both knew that many households still owned harpsichords [*clavecin*]. By giving the players a choice, they hoped to increase sales; however, harpsichord was impractical for music of such turbulence and subtlety, particularly if combined with three string instruments.

Furthermore, Mozart's keyboard writing bears no relationship to Baroque continuo. Rather, it is a direct offshoot of his piano concerto style. He composed three splendid keyboard concerti in 1785: No.20 in D Minor, K.466; No.21 in C Major, K.467; and No.22 in E-flat Major, K.482. The following year, he repeated that astonishing productivity and quality, completing No. 23 in A Major, K.488, No.24 in C Minor, K.491, and No.25 in C Major, K.503. He conducted *all* of these superb works from the keyboard in performance during the Lenten seasons of 1785 and 1786. His command of the Viennese fortepiano's expressive and technical capabilities was unparalleled.

Similarly, he endowed this new genre – the piano quartet – with a profound and secure mastery of string writing. By 1785 he had also completed the six string quartets dedicated to Haydn, each one a masterpiece. He brought that skill and experience to the piano quartet, combining it with his marvelous facility and depth at the keyboard.

The E-flat piano quartet was completed in June, 1786. A richly balanced work, it is expansive and refined; a finely cut, polished jewel of classical architecture. Among its marvels are a roller coaster journey through a rapid series of modulations in the development section of the opening movement. Mozart passes through no fewer than nine keys before the recapitulation.

Both Haydn's and Mozart's piano trios permit the keyboard to dominate, relegating the violin to a largely *obbligato* status; the cello tends to duplicate the bass line. Mozart's piano quartets are markedly different from these piano trios in that the instruments share thematic material more judiciously. In K.493, the exchange and interchange of musical ideas is most evident in the *Larghetto*, where all four instruments explore Mozart's gentle lyric chromaticism. In the finale, Mozart favors the pianist, whose virtuosic runs link this movement closely to the piano concerti.

String Quintet in G minor, K.516
Wolfgang Amadè Mozart

Mozart's string quintets are relatively late works. A couple of earlier compositions for winds were transcribed later for string quintet, but the great works in the genre begin with the Quintet in C, K.515 and continue through the late E-flat Quintet, K. 593. In one sense, Mozart invented a new genre of chamber music with the string quintets. In another, he was adding to a venerable tradition already established by his contemporaries Michael Haydn and, especially, Luigi Boccherini. The difference lay in scoring. Where Boccherini, a fine cellist, opted to double the lowest instrument of the string quartet, Mozart chose to add a second viola; his quintets are generally called viola quintets for this reason. Mozart preferred to preserve the clarity of his bass line with the single cello. By adding another viola, he darkened the sound of the ensemble and provided opportunities to enrich the inner voices.

The G-minor Quintet we hear this afternoon dates from 1787, a year that was dominated by Mozart's work on the opera *Don Giovanni*. Remarkably, he also found time to compose this quintet and its companion piece, the Quintet in C, K. 515; the splendid violin sonata in A major, K. 526, and the beloved string serenade, *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, K. 525.

In addition to the pressure of finishing an opera, Mozart also faced the emotional stress of his father's declining health. A letter to Leopold dated April 4, 1787 contains Wolfgang's reaction upon learning that his father was gravely ill.

> I need not tell you how I long to receive some comforting news from you. . . death is the true goal of our life. . . its image is no longer terrifying to me, but rather it is calming and consoling! I never go to bed without thinking -- young as I am -- that I may not see the next day.

Leopold died the following month. Wolfgang had completed the joyous C major Quintet, K.515 only weeks before that happened, and its sunny spirit is devoid of any impending tragedy. The G minor Quintet on this afternoon's program is a different matter altogether. Finished on 16 May, it is suffused with grief, a frustrated cry of anguish.

Works in minor mode were relatively rare in the late 18th century. Mozart reserved G minor for singular expressions of rage, giving vent only rarely to this side of his complex personality. He concentrated enormous emotional energy into his few essays in G minor. Keeping company with this Quintet are the G minor Piano Quartet, K. 478, the interlude to the slow movement of the D minor Piano Concerto, K. 466, and of course the two magnificent symphonies in G minor: No. 25 (K. 183) and No. 40 (K. 550). There is also a set of variations for violin and piano, K. 360.

Musicologist Stanley Sadie has written of the G minor string quintet:

> The sadness of G minor is of a very different kind, bordering on despair, and explicit enough for the least percipient listener. The G minor Quintet is often seen as Mozart's most personal utterance in any field, and indeed not even the G minor Symphony [K. 550], for all of the tragedy that one may find in it, has such a powerful emotional effect.

Michael Levey concurs, calling K. 516

> . . . a work taut, economical and almost violently intense -- the product, it might be thought of someone waiting for news which he suspects will be bad.

H. C. Robbins Landon believes the G minor Symphony and this Quintet "constitute perhaps the most personal music that Mozart ever wrote."

Clearly each listener must search within himself to find his own personal insight into the piece. Among the landmarks along this momentous musical journey is the unusual placement of the Minuet as the second movement, a break from the customary order. A series of lopsided outbursts on the third beat seems to be a gesture of defiance from the composer. Throughout the ensuing *Adagio ma non troppo*, the strings are muted, yet despite the apparent tranquility of this E-flat major respite from G minor, a layer of strain and agitation seems ready to erupt at any time. As with the earlier G minor piano Quartet, Mozart closes the work in the key of G major, attempting to placate his Viennese audience with "lighter" music. His lilting 6/8 phrases are deceptively facile, however. Their chromaticism lends even this cheery finale a carefully concealed, but still perceptible, element of menace beneath its well-mannered surface.