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Mozart Quintet, K. 406

My first encounter with Mozart's c minor quintet, K406, was at a party. I was a student at a summer chamber music program in Taos, New Mexico, and was part of a group called upon to sight-read music as background entertainment at an outdoor gathering. We arrived armed with the music for the Mozart quintets and decided, at random, to start with the c minor, a piece none of us knew at the time. As we played, my friends and I were struck by an odd double sensation: we were overwhelmed by the austere power of the work, and we were overwhelmed as well (almost to the point of laughing) by the complete inappropriateness of this music to the occasion at hand.

I could not have known then what I later learned, that this experience oddly mimics the historical questions that surround this particular work. For the c minor String Quintet is a later arrangement of the c minor Serenade for wind octet, K388. Wind serenades were, in Mozart's time, commonly commissioned for specific outdoor events, typically festive music, light and diverting in character. The precise genesis of this particular serenade is unknown, and the piece is a puzzle in that it so completely plays against type. This is a dark work, serious and compositionally complex. Perhaps this helps to explain why Mozart saw fit to make the present arrangement, as wind serenades were often forgotten once the occasion for which they were written had passed, and in bringing the music into a more "serious" form the composer might ensure that it would be heard again and again. Although there are orchestrational beauties and timbral contrasts in the original that Mozart had to give up in arranging the piece for only five parts (and for more homogenous instruments than the original combination), the music survives the transcription admirably well.

Whereas g minor in Mozart's oeuvre is a key suggesting pathos and tragedy, c minor seems a key at once less vulnerable and more stern. Of course it would become a key very important to Beethoven for such pieces as the Third Piano Concerto and the Fifth Symphony, where the potent force of Fate is felt so strongly. And in fact the opening of Mozart's c minor quintet is not entirely dissimilar to that of Beethoven's piano concerto in the same key, both starting out with nearly brutally raw unison statements answered by a more poignant, fully harmonized quiet response. For Mozart, the end of the unison theme features a falling diminished seventh, an interval with painful connotations to be explored later in the movement. The quiet response in the first phrase has the first violin reaching ever higher in a series of melancholic sighs. This dialogue between austere, almost heartless music and music that pleads and questions gives the movement its shape and meaning. The dichotomy is

perhaps most moving when it is exposed as two facets of the same material, for example in the falling seventh of the opening transformed into a plaintive sigh or the declamatory closing theme when it is repeated in piano, now unsure and trembling. The exposition gives us a moment of relief in the elegant and buoyant second theme in major, but, as is so often the most painful and beautiful moment in Mozart's minor key first movements, when it returns in the second part of the movement it is enshrouded in a veil of tears, now in minor and with the addition of suspensions in the melodic line and a portentously murmuring accompaniment.

The Andante moves into the relative major and seems precisely to embody the feeling which inspires us to create words like "bittersweet." A gentle lilt is felt throughout despite off-balance stresses and heart-rending harmonic clashes. If this is perhaps a garden love scene in which none of the difficulties or vicissitudes of love are ignored, still there are moments when the innocent charm of the garden itself infects the proceedings and all is momentarily cleansed.

The Menuetto once again plays against type, as, ironically, is not uncommon for Mozart. It is useful for a composer to have a received form carrying so many expectations of character and dance-like pulse, for he can then thwart these expectations to great expressive gain. In the present case, Mozart gives a simple dance a rigorous contrapuntal treatment, severe and heavy. The theme starts with some rhythmic ambiguity, having a pulse in three which is twice as slow as the meter of the dance, a device more commonly used in the baroque (to which this movement pays homage) at the ends of phrases. The contrasting trio section is for string quartet, with the second viola silent, and is a canon in inversion, a musical depiction of the still beauty in the double image of nature and its reflection in the water.

A series of variations closes out the work, in which neighboring variations often serve as foils to each other through startling juxtapositions. At two points in the movement the original idea of a wind serenade makes itself felt. The first of these is a variation in E-flat major in which we hear "horn fifths" - the call of hunting horns in the woods. Of course in the original we hear actual horns, and here we have a reference to the idea of horns in the violas. (Those who know Borges' Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote may enjoy musing over the differences in meaning created through the shift in reference point.) Then in the final variation, having found our way to C Major, we hear the type of music we might have expected all along in a serenade, and we escape the interior, complex world we have inhabited for the whole piece so far to gallivant briefly in the open air.

Note by Mark Steinberg