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Mozart Quartet K. 499

Mozart's K. 499 Quartet is subtitled the "Hoffmeister" Quartet, after his friend (and sometime publisher) Franz Hoffmeister. A more apt, descriptive title for the work might be the "Figaro" Quartet, after the extraordinary opera that Mozart composed in the same year. Like *The Marriage of Figaro*, the quartet is built around the key of D major: in Mozart's music this is often a radiant place, shot through with life and joy. But more essentially, the two works share a particular and complex comic sensibility: the onlookers enjoy the joke, the witty remark, the unsuspecting victim, but they sense at the same time a pathos, a shadow, or a sorrow underlying the moment. So much of the potency of Mozart's genius lies in this, his ability to simultaneously evoke laughter and tears in a single phrase, a single gesture.

The first movement opens in a way that seems utterly innocent and guileless: a united gesture that wishes us "good morning", then dividing into pairs of instruments that bow and hold the door for each other. Every aspect of the scene is so blithe and untroubled, in fact, that it is impossible not to suspect that somebody has a trick up his sleeve; and sure enough, the music explodes into B minor, and life starts to get complicated. Eventually the second violin line launches into an undulating, traveling pattern of 8th-notes whose motion will carry on through most of the rest of the movement. The characters in this story are destined to travel through many different scenes on this 8th-note carriage, but, as in life, they won't necessarily be able to control the journey, or choose when to get off. The comedy of manners persists, flowing imperturbably along, urbane on the surface, but with many an ironic aside, many a clever subplot. Twice, at important structural points, the 8th-note carriage grinds to a halt; in the silence one can imagine the traveler peering behind one curtain, and then another, uncertain, perhaps suspecting a trick, only to be swept up again in a new direction. The second time this happens, near the very end of the movement, Mozart provides a musical rejoinder that is so eloquent and touching that the previous jokes and deceptions seem suddenly not to matter at all; as in *Figaro*, he treats the victims of his humor with unexpected tenderness, and we too fall a little bit in love with them in the end.

The second movement is a minuet of startling pomp and grandeur, nearly orchestral in its demands on the quartet – a departure from the typical minuet in Mozart's chamber music, which tends to dwell on what is subtle and clever. Here, again, the image of an operatic scene appears before our eyes, perhaps a set piece with gilded trappings which fills the stage with dancers at a grand ball. Harmonically, there are hints of darkness, chromatic twists and turns; but in the main, these dancing characters are compelled to maintain their demeanor, to observe the forms. By contrast, the central Trio section whisks us off to a side room, filled with cunning minor-key whispers, arguments, elaborate handoffs. No Mozart opera is without schemers and plotters.

The third movement descends one key level, down to a deeper and darker G major. It is the same key in which, in a sublime and moving scene at the very end of *Figaro*, the Count pleads with his wife to forgive him and be reconciled. In the quartet, the atmosphere is lovely in the same intimate, dusky way, the air full of confession; but where the Count's music is simple, unclothed, almost painfully bare, here the writing is ornate, winged, impossibly graceful. The finishing of one phrase or idea constantly dovetails or elides with the start of the next idea, creating the impression of feet never touching the ground, always being lifted gently into the next updraft, a seamless outpouring of eloquence. Almost from the start, Mozart uses chromatic motion to darken the scene, to twist the knife within what is essentially radiant and blissful; and throughout the movement that chromatic tendency will persist, conjuring a penumbra of minor hovering constantly near each glowing, major-key utterance. The musicologist Maynard Solomon described these shadowy, unbalanced hallmarks of

Mozart's late style as evoking "a sense of restlessness and instability, and even of the uncanny and dangerous...these beauties express the nameless feelings, those that are elusive, fused, ambivalent, fantastic." Joy, pain, love, dread: the place where they overlap, their meeting point, is captured in Mozart's greatest music.

The finale is by far the most carefree of the four movements, and at the same time it is in some ways the most compositionally ambitious, filled with contrapuntal games, sequences with more than one idea occurring simultaneously, rhythmic complexity. There are two main ideas that alternate and sometimes overlap or clash. The first is a graceful, fluttering triplet shape in the first violin which stops short, teasingly, a couple of times in its utterance, before flying away, rising just out of reach. The other idea is a childlike, scampering tune in an 8th-note scale, even more fun-loving than the first melody, eventually playing dodgeball or tag with itself in syncopated rhythms. The movement's mission is to alternate the two ideas in ever increasing proximity to each other, playfully, to the point where they start to tangle and layer on top of one another. Between the simplicity of the material and the sophistication of the combinations, the effect is that of two small children turning out to be able to converse brilliantly about quantum physics or Shakespeare. In this sense, the movement prefigures the great finales of Mozart's 39th or 41st symphonies – and recalls the most elaborate writing in Figaro – where the richness and complexity of his invention somehow coexist with an essential joy and lightness, buoyancy and freedom.

Note by Misha Amory