

# MOZART “Haydn” Quartets

When Mozart completed his six string quartets dedicated to Haydn in 1785, he created six of the finest quartets ever written, absolute touchstones of the genre that have remained at the core of the repertory ever since. These quartets were a quantum leap from Mozart's earlier quartets and, in most estimations, outshine the remaining four quartets that followed. There are several reasons that contributed to the outstanding quality of these six "Haydn" quartets. Mozart met Haydn in person for the first time in 1781 and had multiple occasions to directly experience Haydn's revolutionary Op. 33 quartets that were first published in 1782. It was also during these first years in Vienna when Mozart came into more intimate contact with the music of Bach. Inspired by Haydn's latest musical miracles and armed with newly expanded contrapuntal skills, Mozart determined to write his own new set of quartets primarily in homage to Haydn in the spirit of pure artistic dialog. In his most intense and significantly painstaking compositional effort, Mozart wrote the six quartets in two groups between December 1782 and January 1785, sending the quartets to Haydn in September 1785 with heartfelt dedication. With this event, Mozart became the second immortal composer to write in the style of the Viennese classical string quartet thereby establishing a true musical genre of the highest order. Upon hearing these quartets, Haydn asserted that Mozart was the finest composer he knew. © Kai Christiansen

## Quartet in G major, K.387

The first of this set, K. 387 in G Major, was written in 1782. Mozart was just 26 years old. The opening movement introduces us to Mozart's inherent lyricism. Although living within the parameters of the form, Mozart infuses a sense of improvisation and flexibility throughout. The second movement, Minuet, offers a glimpse into Mozart's understanding of Haydn. Both playful and innovative, he displaces one's sense of the beat throughout the movement - undoubtedly with a wink to Haydn. The slow movement feels like a very personal window inside of Mozart. Treating the first violin as a singer, the proceeding aria explores each register with depth and poignancy while surrounding this voice with rich counterpoint and chromaticism. The finale takes us all by surprise - a fugue! Four point counterpoint surrounds a simple and plaintive five note subject with syncopation and almost a sense of teasing. The second subject is treated similarly, and we experience all of the celebration of this flurry of activity. And as one might predict, the movement ends unpredictably with a conclusion devoid of grandeur and yet so full of life.

## Quartet in d minor, K.421

In Mozart's D minor Quartet, K. 421 we travel within an operatic landscape from moment one. Historic analysis suggested the first movement was an aria unto itself - with the text living in the first violin line and reflected in the voicing beneath. This is all a larger point of reflection about the classic period. Although the forms of movements and their intentions became somewhat codified in later years, during the era itself this style was inexorably linked to opera. Within this context Mozart established a world of contrast, dramatic tension, narrative, and relationships - between its characters and within each.

The first three movements of K. 421 begin with the vocal gestures of a leading character - a sigh, an interruption, and a declamation. And although the fourth movement is set as a theme and variations, it carries the threads of the dance and the sigh throughout. In the end we travel with these characters on a layered journey from the opening to its close.

As the aria begins at the outset of the first movement, we are deeply aware of the inner voices. Their repetition offers a consistent foil to the sighing gesture and speaks to the inevitability of time. The second movement is enchanting and inward, and this dramatic change of scene offers reflection and renewal. The Minuet lives in a certain defiance - the repetitions and sighs of the previous movements face one another throughout. The conflict remains unresolved, but with his brilliant sense of wit, Mozart turns to whimsy in the Trio. The final movement brings the work together. A theme and variations we travel vocally with our characters, ultimately arriving in major. This sense of returning home ties the journey together with joy and resonance. And beyond that circular expression, Mozart takes us all the way back to the opening measures of the work with the final statement. Having lived the entire journey, we are left to reflect and rejoice.

## Quartet in Eb major, K.428

The most concise, most secret, no doubt, and most abstract of the six Quartets dedicated to Haydn, K. 428 in E Flat offers meditation and gushing optimism intimately mingled while revealing Mozart's mercurial temperament. The E-flat Quartet was the third in this series of quartets that Mozart dedicated to his great friend and colleague, a series that took Mozart over two years to write. That these quartets cost Mozart an enormous effort is revealed not only by their analysis but also by the famous dedicatory letter to Haydn, where they are described as the fruit of long and painful labor. Mozart presents them as his children and entrusts them with touching affection to the sponsorship of his elder.

The friendship between these two great composers has been a source of wonder and admiration to music lovers ever since, especially when you think of the bitter animosities and partisan coterie that have surrounded later composers. Haydn recognized Mozart's universal superiority early on and he made no secret of it: *Friends have flattered me that I have genius, but he surpassed me. When offered an opera commission in Prague, he replied: that would be too daring a thing to do, in that hardly anyone can risk being compared to the great Mozart.* This generosity of spirit was reciprocated by the younger composer, who freely admitted that these quartets could not have been written without the groundbreaking work of his mentor.

The opening Allegro begins mysteriously with a sinuous theme played in unison, its character of drifting reverie open to a myriad of possibilities. After a brief crescendo, the veil is lifted and the theme makes its appearance, harmonized with the harsh but invigorating dissonances of the human condition. Triplets and dotted rhythms give the second theme the character of a march and its varied rhythms make up the subject matter of the development section. This is a strange and complex movement, and like the extraordinary slow movement, it seems to belong to a later era with its probing explorations of musical boundaries.

The Andante is famous for its echoes of *Tristan und Isolde* long before Wagner was even born. The atmosphere is at once hazy and nocturnal with the warm tones of the strings restricted to the medium-low register. No clear theme stands out from the deliberately flowing, imprecise rhythms. The music uncoils in soothing spirals, blurring the formal outlines that only appear as sonata form on paper. This is Tristan's kingdom of the night bathed in mystery and subtle changing harmonies. Here is music centered almost exclusively on preoccupations of color, one of the boldest, most prophetic conceptions of Mozart's art.

The Menuetto is a startling contrast to the previous movements with its sharp, decisive attack and clear-cut rhythms. However, the harmonic lighting reaffirms itself again and gains in color to the point of introducing joyful, rustic musette pedals. The Trio revisits the strange world of the Andante with a long, undulating melody, which journeys unpredictably through a series of unexpected keys accompanied again by long pedals. The Finale is a lively rondo, though even this seemingly conventional conclusion retains something of the otherworldly character of the previous movements. Through episodes that are in turn gay or more serious, it hurries towards its witty conclusion, preceded by rests and suspensions – a favorite trick of the dedicatee. This light and joyful creation is brought to a resounding conclusion by four vigorous chords. - *West Cork Music*

## Quartet in Bb major, K.458

The String Quartet in B-flat Major, K. 458 was the fourth quartet in the series written in November of 1784. Known as the "Hunt" Quartet, it is easily the most popular of the "Haydn" quartets. Its nickname, supplied by someone other than Mozart, refers to the opening theme of the first movement that suggests the shape, open harmony and clarity of a simple hunting call with the violin duet suggesting a pair of horns. This warm clarion motif launches one of Mozart's finest sonata movements. The luxurious elegance of this first theme gives way to the second theme vividly "tagged" by simple five-note motif like a trill or a "shake." This deceptively simple musical figure saturates the movement, fuels the development and provides the chief contrast to the equally pervasive hunting horn motif. The wealth of musical material built from these simple elements is astonishing and comprehensive: Mozart explores the full latent potential of his elemental means reaching a zenith of expanded expression in a breathtaking coda. Not unusual for Mozart, the development begins with a brand new theme, a lovely point of fresh repose before the "shake" motif launches the probing exploration, suddenly obsessed with what had first seemed merely incidental.

The second movement is a moderate and stately minuet with a more animated trio featuring delicate clockwork in the inner voices, a singing first violin with canonic echoes from the cello in a pleasing polarity of treble and bass. The third movement adagio is long, tender and intense. As with many of Mozart's finest slow movements for string chamber ensemble, a delicate, spacious poise deepens into a fragile vulnerability with the exposed cello lines hinting at the rarefied intimacy of his late Prussian quartets.

The initial theme of the energetic finale seems to echo the simple triadic character of the opening hunt motif and, despite some commentators' objections to an inappropriate association, here the music fairly conjures the bristling excitement of the chase. The second theme supplies yet another simple horn-like charge with a call and response bouncing off a hilly countryside. The supercharged drive of this shimmering, nervous conclusion bounds over the river and through the woods in a fleet, fluid hybrid of sonata and rondo forms, the first contributing a tense developmental climax, the second a lively recurring refrain. Of the Haydn quartets, this is surely the most direct, uncomplicated and winning of the six. Of the riches within these remarkable masterworks, this is, of course, but the tip of an iceberg.

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## Quartet in A major, K.464

The A major Quartet is the fifth in Mozart's set of six quartets dedicated to his great friend Joseph Haydn. It was written at the time of Mozart's greatest triumphs, when his name was on every lip due to the spectacular success of his subscription concerts. And as time would unfold, Beethoven's A major Quartet in his Opus 18 set is clearly composed as a homage to Mozart's A major.

Mozart's opening movement is built on the briefest of material, more questions and answers than fully formed themes. The first subject, for instance, consists of a query put by the first violin and a vigorous unison reply; the second subject is even less substantial, three rising notes and a graceful run of triplets. The exposition closes with a restatement of the opening before we are launched into the complex development based entirely on the questioning figure and its answer. The recapitulation is straightforward, and the movement ends uneventfully.

The Minuet is based on another terse phrase, almost as if asking *what is the question for this answer*. The questioning figure gets tossed hither and thither in many different voices, some harsh, some gentle. The Trio is more euphonic though the desire to embellish and decorate soon takes over.

The D major *Andante* is a theme with six variations and a coda. The theme is quiet and reflective, the kind of beauty that succeeds by understatement in abrupt contrast to the florid embellishments of the first variation. The second one takes a completely new path, establishing a secondary theme to be explored in the drumbeat sixth variation. The third variation plunges into an aura of mystery led by Mozart's viola before we are dragged even further afield into dramatic and gloomy D minor. The fifth variation retains the air of uncertainty before all is made clear with the extraordinary drum taps of the sixth, which continue right into the coda where each instrument gets to hold the drumsticks, though the cello gets the most fun.

The surprises are not over yet for this is the movement that Beethoven relished. It is ostensibly in sonata form though you would be forgiven if you thought it was an endless imitative hot pursuit of the opening ideas, until the sudden intrusion in the middle of the development of a lofty chorale in D major, which also returns in the recapitulation. The coda picks up on Haydn's practice of joke endings to give a witty and enigmatic close. *Francis Humphrys*

# Quartet in C major “Dissonance”, K.465

It is also fair to say that, within this set of Mozart quartets about which no praise could possibly be hyperbolic, the sixth and final quartet is arguably the most noteworthy. Ever since its innovative, foreboding, dark shadow of an introduction was first heard by rapt if not shocked listeners, it has borne the nickname "Dissonance." The music begins as if it arose from a probing development section by Beethoven filled with brooding anxiety, pulsing, accented, distorted and evasive, eschewing harmonic resolution by drifting ever farther off course. As legend has it, the first publishers initially sent it back to Mozart believing it was riddled with mistakes. But this two-minute dramatic feint becomes the foil for one of Mozart's most radiant and beneficent sonatas of all, bursting forth as a bright triumph of consonance in the natural key of C major. The first movement is a finely wrought sonata form, exquisitely articulated and naturally fluid with the fresh textures of Viennese high classicism: melody, motive, counterpoint and development, a refined dialog among four independent and highly cultivated souls. The dissonant introduction would jump like a spark of inspiration directly to Beethoven who greatly admired its ingenuity and clearly applied it to his own epic responses to the genre.

The slow movement is sweet and singing with a much more homophonic texture throughout. Mozart's operatic gift for lyricism stretched across an arc of dramatic tension is fully present as violin and cello call and respond lovingly over a chasm of latent despair, the thread held tight by a little four-note trailing ornament that ingeniously becomes a motive-based mantra. As in so many of Mozart's slow movements, melodic beauty is developed and deepened through aching wounds.

The third movement Menuetto is a *mélange* of melody, motive, counterpoint and development again. Instead of a simple minuet tune, Mozart writes another fully articulated drama like another little sonata of remarkable character, all still before the trio. The trio section only doubles this sensation of conflict within a larger unity. A shift to a minor key with a whole new sense of nearly Schubertian restless pathos pursues its own little inner sonata before returning to the minuet whose chromatic swoons seem just a bit more edgy now.

The high art of this remarkable quartet ends with yet another *tour de force* of formal construction, elegance and wit burnished with immediate surface appeal. A rondo form (with recurring refrain and intervening episodes) is merged with A theme and variations (the rondo theme constantly varies) and the overarching dramatic plan of a sonata (the rondo theme and episodes wander and develop). The character is

by turns effervescent, dark and lyrical, the counterpoint is rich, the rhythmic drive is irrepressible, and the musical variety is inexpressible. Every bar of music is both a stitch in a fabric continuity as well new innovation in texture, harmony or variation. And so closes the sixth chapter of the second book of the greatest string quartets in history. © **Kai Christiansen.**