

Mozart's "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major"

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Compositions for string quintets date from the 1750s in Austria, and most likely originated from the Italian *sinfonia* and *concerto*. Mozart composed his first string quintet, "String Quintet in B flat," in 1773. Mozart's "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major" was a commissioned work and was composed in December of 1790.

"Minuet for String Quintet in D Major" was considered by some to not be up to par with his prior compositions for string quintet, blamed on the stressful conditions in his life at the time (Eisen 74). But others think it represented a new direction for Mozart in that it avoided surface flair and focused on a singular primary idea for both the surface and underlying structure. Those who understood this new structural style for Mozart considered it extremely good indeed. Professor Robert Gutman wrote that K593<sup>1</sup> was "a refined and intricate contrapuntal masterpiece" (717).

The first movement of the quintet has a more modest texture than prior quintets of Mozart, but it is rich in tone. Each of its five main sections is created around a recurring theme. After the song begins, the full ensemble plays together at the same time. Then it reduces to three parts in a clever manner—the violins and first viola alternate with both violas and the cello so that only three instruments are playing at once. Then the ensemble returns to fullness with all five parts playing together again. So although "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major" was composed in a "later" style of Mozart, the essence of this later style for quintets is a return to an aesthetic of "unity of affect" (Eisen 77). In the earlier quintets, change and variation were common. His later two quintets were more concerned with thematic uniformity.

Mozart highly valued melody in a song. But his concept of melody is different from what

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<sup>1</sup> In 1862, Ludwig von Köchel created a system of cataloging Mozart's compositions with the attempt to list them in chronological order. K593 specifically refers to "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major."

we think of as melody today. We think of melody almost like a long sentence put forth by a single dominant voice. For Mozart, melody was composed with short phrases of usually four to eight bars in length, and these “melodies” were always combined with other melodies from other instruments (Harris 329). Each melodic voice combined to create the whole sense of melody. “Minuet for String Quintet in D Major” exemplifies just this same interplay of melodies.

One musical topic that is important to consider when discussing the works of Mozart is that of texture. Texture is not a single musical element. Rather, it is a combination of all aspects of a piece of music. The texture is often indicative of a time and place. “Minuet for String Quintet in D Major” instills in us a sense of Vienna in the late 1700s. Since the concert hall as we know it today did not exist in Mozart’s era, his songs were composed “for the salon and drawing room” (Harris 17). Concert halls weren’t needed since there was not a mass middle class public that would attend concerts. Mozart was alive when the feudal era ended in Europe, but he still composed with that era in mind in the sense that individuals of the nobility were the typical patrons. He therefore wrote to entertain those of upper social status. Balance and order were valued by those patrons more than were passion and freedom of expression. So there were some imposed limitations on Mozart. But he created magnificently within those traditional confines. The texture of “Minuet for String Quintet in D Major” was balanced and ordered, and not overly expressive, as one would expect from a piece by Mozart around 1790.

Time is another concept to consider when discussing Mozart’s work. For instance, it may be wondered whether the song is atomistic or continuous. Each is true, relatively speaking, so “Minuet for String Quintet in D Major” is both atomistic and continuous. It is atomistic in that it exists within its own envelope of time. It occupies an aural space. Also, the piece can be studied and segmented into phrases, and each phrase occupies its own time within its own meter. “For

any meter...a symmetry has been created, imposing order on the seeming chaos of 'real time'" (Harris 19). Yet the song is also continuous when it is considered that its notes follow a linear progression.

A metaphor for musical time can help capture some of its qualities that might be overlooked when discussing music. With "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major," consider the metaphor of a discussion among five friends. One starts the conversation by making a point, or by gaining their interest with a clever comment. Others nod in acknowledgement as the four other strings in the song playfully join in. Every now and then one voice is louder than the others, as is necessary to stress an important point. Sometimes all voices seem loud, as if each is trying to be the dominant voice at that moment. Eventually they become one with the topic at hand and are synchronously harmonious. At the end of the piece, it is as if the friends must all part and go their separate ways. There is definitive conclusion to a discussion among the friends, probably with a wave goodbye, and similarly among the five strings of the quintet with a wave goodbye in the form of a D major chord.

One must consider the *now* moment in music to get the richest appreciation of the moment. The *now* in its most literal sense is exclusively the present moment. A song passes so seemingly quickly that *now* moments progress continuously in the form of a song. Many things can happen concomitantly in a *now* moment, as various instruments have their *now* moments together, the result being a sound that is harmonious—a chord. Consider also a conductor signaling the cellist in "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major" when a certain time to enter approaches. That *now* moment for the cellist signals an entrance. Other instruments have already had their *now* moments of entrance and they similarly all have *now* moments of pause. They continue on with *now* moments adding up to a completed performance. Mozart composed the

song in a combinations present moments, and structured it in a meter of three-quarter time. He could look at his score for any given instant of time and see the notes or chords that would play at that precise moment.

Music doesn't have only one time. A musical work is relative to the time it is played. Each performance can render a different interpretation or observation of time. The difference can be markedly different. Consider how different it would be if one is used to listening to an audio recording of "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major" and then hears it played live at a different tempo. This minuet played faster or slower than the familiar recording would produce a different affect on the listener.

Memory does play a special role in apprehending music. Played at a different tempo, the song will be different from what is in memory, but will of course still be recognizable as the same song. Memory manifests in two main ways through the sense of sight and the sense of sound. All cellists will see the first two notes on the score for "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major" and will be able to recognize those notes as D and F sharp, and will know where they can be played on their respective instruments. They will also know, by sight, that those two notes are to be slurred with one bow stroke. They have learned these things, and many other fundamentals, through countless hours of formal musical training.

The second role of musical memory is manifested aurally, so that a certain note will sound a certain way to the ear due to repetitive listening and playing. In "Minuet for String Quintet in D Major," there is an interplay of notes and phrases by the performing musicians and they all must listen to know, as sharpened from drill and memory, when their respective parts are played with notes and pauses, and through desired intonation.

Not only is musical time important for understanding Mozart, but a different type of

“time” should be considered, and that is the time frame around when he composed “Minuet for String Quintet in D Major.” By the summer of 1789, Mozart was in debt and felt pressured to gain control of his finances. His worry affected his ability to compose. He had a commission from the Prussian king to complete twelve compositions. But he was only able to complete four—one sonata and three string quartets (Davies 157).

During 1790 Mozart was often ill and tended towards anxiety and to worry (Davies 156). He may also have been depressed, since insomnia often accompanies melancholia, and Mozart was known to have uncharacteristically risen as early as 4:30 a.m. during this period of time. His personal despair seemed to diminish, however, when he had some favorable focus on a person, an issue or a worthwhile goal.

He completed only nine works in 1790, which was well below his average of 27 works a year for the prior eleven years. Considering his state of worry at the time, it might have affected the compositional style that resulted in “Minuet for String Quintet in D Major,” and might explain why some felt it wasn’t equal to his earlier compositions for string quintets. Maybe he was sad at the time, but the song doesn’t necessarily have any hints of sadness trying to surface from within its structure. In fact, it was much easier to notice sadness in the works of Mozart that were composed in minor keys.

“Minuet for String Quintet in D Major” was commissioned by Johann Tost<sup>2</sup> (Davies 97). By the time it was written in December of 1790, there had been an upturn in Mozart’s finances. He had obvious ups and downs in his finances, as can be reflected by moves to six different residences during the last six years of his life. But his last residence on the Rauhensteingasse in Vienna was a very nice one, indicating a welcome upturn in his income. But financial worry was still fresh on his mind, because as recently as October of 1790 he had borrowed money and

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<sup>2</sup> Johann Tost had been an orchestral violinist. After receiving an inheritance, he became a factory owner.

pawned a silver platter (Davies 96).

It was at the house on the Rauhensteingasse where Mozart first performed “Minuet for String Quintet in D Major” for his patron. According to tradition, Mozart himself and Joseph Hayden played the viola parts, and the song was likely an homage to Hayden (Gutman 716).

It is not clear exactly how bad Mozart’s health was at the time he composed “Minuet for String Quintet in D Major,” but his lingering financial stress may have been a contributing factor in his deteriorating health, and he weakened over the coming year. In the early morning hours of December 5, 1791, less than a year after Mozart had finished the quintet, he passed away.

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