

W.A. Mozart (1756-91), String Quartet No.19 in C major, K.465, “Dissonance” (1785)

Mozart took up permanent residence in Vienna in 1781, the year that Franz Joseph Haydn composed the six string quartets of his Opus 33. During the next few years the two composers, separated in age by 24 years, had occasion to see each other often, an association that included playing quartets together, Haydn on violin and Mozart on viola, and the two became close friends, a friendship founded on mutual admiration. Haydn was by then the leading composer in Europe, and Mozart’s fame and career were quickly rising.

With 30 string quartets already to his credit, Haydn’s Opus 33 represented a significant milestone in his writing in the genre. Nine years had elapsed since his six Opus 20 quartets, a hiatus that can only have represented the incubation period for an entirely new conception of the genre. Haydn himself commented that the Opus 33 quartets were written “in an entirely new and particular manner,” by which he was surely signaling the maturation of his techniques of thematic elaboration and development that are among the most important hallmarks of what was then the evolving classical style.

In 1782, a year after Haydn composed the Opus 33 quartets, Mozart set about composing his own set of six quartets in response. Completed in 1785, the set includes K. 387 in G major, K. 421 in D minor, K. 458 in B flat major, K. 428 in E flat major, K. 464 in A major and K. 465 in C major, nicknamed the “Dissonance” quartet. Mozart dedicated the set, published in 1785 and now known as the “Haydn Quartets,” to his older friend. The dedication reads:

“To my dear friend Haydn,

A father who had resolved to send his children out into the great world took it to be his duty to confide them to the protection and guidance of a very celebrated Man, especially when the latter by good fortune was at the same time his best Friend. Here they are then, O great Man and dearest Friend, these six children of mine. They are, it is true, the fruit of a long and laborious endeavor, yet the hope inspired in me by several Friends that it may be at least partly compensated encourages me, and I flatter myself that this offspring will serve to afford me solace one day. You, yourself, dearest friend, told me of your satisfaction with them during your last Visit to this Capital. It is this indulgence above all which urges me to commend them to you and encourages me to hope that they will not seem to you altogether unworthy of your favour. May it therefore please you to receive them kindly and to be their Father, Guide and Friend! From this moment I resign to you all my rights in them, begging you however to look indulgently upon the defects which the partiality of a Father's eye may have concealed from me, and in spite of them to continue in your generous Friendship for him who so greatly values it, in expectation of which I am, with all of my Heart, my dearest Friend, your most Sincere Friend,

- W.A. Mozart”

It is the harmonically and contrapuntally intricate adagio introduction to the first movement that earned the K. 465 quartet the nickname “Dissonance.” Yet the many

commentators who dwell on the notion that this introduction undermines or “problematizes” the “pure” key of C major by not establishing it unambiguously at the outset overlook the central idea in this and many other works of Mozart, and his contemporaries Haydn and Beethoven, that employ this type of introduction — namely that the introduction is specifically designed to be a suspenseful prologue carefully preparing us for the light-hearted Allegro which is the real beginning of the piece proper. That the faster tempo, the unambiguous C major tonality and the sonata form’s jovial first theme all arrive simultaneously is the whole point, and in resolving the brooding complexities and ambiguities of the introduction, their confluence produces a dramatic event worthy of the finest moments in Mozartean opera. The leisurely presentation of the C major theme and its two contrasting themes in G major make for a pleasant excursion. The subsequent development section focuses exclusively on the opening motive of the C major theme, casting it in various other keys, but always in the darker shades of the minor mode, or in unstable, leading harmonies, and the drama of the recapitulation comes entirely from the contrast between these darker inflections and the brightness of the main theme’s reprise in its original form in C major.

The second movement in F major, marked *Andante cantabile*, is structured as a sonata form with no development section, a fairly common formal variant. The opening theme is pure Mozartean inventiveness, each phrase fitting perfectly without recourse to repetition of any kind. A transition based on a short motive tossed back and forth between first violin and cello ushers in the pulsating, suspension-filled second theme in C major, and a reworking of the earlier transition closes the exposition, and leads right into the recapitulation, an ornamented reprise of the opening. The movement’s ending, with its faster pulsation in 16th notes in the viola, provides a surprising sense of lift and release, as the motive of the transition is now overlaid with a touching lyrical strand in the first violin, derived from the main theme.

Of any of the quartet’s movements, the Minuet and Trio, with its short phrases cleverly interleaved, and momentary contrasts of loud and soft playing, seems the closest to Haydn’s aesthetic in the Opus 33 quartets, though noticeably missing is the often extraordinary asymmetry of phrase structure typical of Haydn’s scherzo movements. The C major tonality of the Minuet is set off against the somewhat unusual employment of the parallel key of C minor in the paired Trio. Unusual too is the relative mood of each, with the minor-inflected Trio far the moodier by comparison with the rustic, carefree Minuet, where traditionally a trio movement would likely be the more pastoral in character of the two, and proceed with less friction.

The allegro finale in C major, whose first theme features pairs of repeated notes, is again in sonata form. After a repetition of the second theme in G major, the music erupts in a dazzling passage of running 16th notes in the first violin, leading unexpectedly to a third theme in the surprising key of E flat major before Mozart closes the exposition with material whose motives derive from the opening C major music. As in the first movement, the brief development section focuses on the first theme, exploring in short order tonal areas largely in the minor mode, to contrast with the exuberance of the brightly major tonalities that populate the exposition and recapitulation. A fine, extended coda concludes matters. Throughout this movement

the music is punctuated at key points by abrupt silences entirely reminiscent of the unexpected jokes and surprises so frequently found in the music of Haydn.

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