

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

### String Quartet in C Major, K. 465, “Dissonant”

As is so often the case, the subtitle of this cheerful and generally consonant quartet is not only inappropriate but actually misleading. Music lovers in the 1780's though, gave it the appellation “Dissonance” because they thought they heard “wrong” notes in the twenty-two-measure introduction. Some did even more: performers in Italy returned the parts to the publisher for corrections. When Prince Grassalkovics heard the music, he considered it a personal insult and ripped up the parts. Even Haydn expressed some shock, although he finally defended the music saying, “Well, if Mozart wrote it, he must have meant it.”

Although Mozart never explained the introduction, others have opined that the dissonance and obscurity was Mozart's was of setting the bright radiance of the rest of the movement, indeed the rest of the work, into bold relief. In actual fact, the first subject of the Allegro body of the movement, a group of lively themes, is all the more telling because it follows the tense opening. The forward motion slows a bit for the second theme, which starts with three repeated notes played by both violins. Mozart imparts a vigorous, buoyant quality to the following development section, even though the texture is thick with polyphonic interweaving. The recapitulation is somewhat shortened and rescored, and the amount of contrapuntal activity is increased. At the end the movement disappears like a puff of smoke in the air.

The second movement, among Mozart's most intimate and personal creations, provides an extremely touching listening experience. After presenting the several individual phrases of the leading theme. Mozart makes the transition to the second theme by means of a simple but sublime conversion between the first violin and cello. The very pure new theme is essentially a repeated note that resolves by going down one step. From the repetitions of this phrase, the movement proceeds through a reminder of the violin/cello dialogue right to the recapitulation, without a development section. Near the end of the recapitulation, though, Mozart introduces a completely new lyrical countermelody against echoes of the violin/cello duet.

The Menuetto crackles with the energy of the startling contrasts of harsh unisons cutting in on gentle melodies and sharp staccato notes following smooth cantilena lines. The trio is in the minor, and its melody of rising and falling widely spaced intervals over motoric, relentless eighth notes seemingly yearns to reach some elusive, unattainable goal. The Menuetto is repeated at the end.

The finale abandons itself to bubbling good spirits. Again Mozart delights the listeners with a plethora of happy motifs, one more charming and joyful than the next, and all presented with wonderful touches of wit and mischievous good humor. A brief development section leads to a return of the thematic sequence and a coda that brings the movement and quartet to a glorious conclusion.

The “Dissonance” Quartet is the last of the set of six that Mozart dedicated to Haydn and is a fitting climax to the series. Mozart finished it on January 14, 1785, four days after completing the previous A Major quartet, K. 464.

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## Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

### Quartet in F minor, Op. 80

Allegro vivace assai ~ Allegro assai ~ Adagio ~ Finale: Allegro molto

This quartet, Mendelssohn's last completed piece of chamber music, is a powerful, impassioned utterance, with more deep feeling than any of his other works. If there is any criticism, it is that the emotions he tried to contain within the confines of a string quartet really require a symphony orchestra for their full expression.

The circumstances attendant on its conception were tragic: On May 17, 1847, Mendelssohn's older sister, Fanny, to whom he was extremely devoted, died suddenly at the age of forty-one. Mendelssohn collapsed on hearing the news and remained so distraught that he was unable to attend the funeral. To help him recover, his wife Cécile convinced him to spend the summer months in Switzerland. At Interlaken Mendelssohn went on solitary walks and made drawings and watercolors of the beautiful landscape, but found it difficult to compose. On July 29, he wrote his younger sister, Rebecca, "I force myself to be industrious in the hope that later on I may feel like working and enjoy it."

By September he had managed to complete his F minor quartet, a sorrowful, yet angry piece that expresses some of the grief and bitterness Mendelssohn must have been feeling. Sadly enough, this profound work, which may have portended the start of a new phase in the composer's musical development, preceded his own death on November 4 by less than two months. The only subsequent chamber music he composed was two movements for a string quartet, which were combined with two individual movements written earlier and published as "Four Pieces for String Quartet," Op. 81.

The motoric passage that opens the first movement builds to an aggressive motto that hurtles down through the quartet. Once again the agitated opening phrase clamors up to the motto theme, but this time arrives as a warm, tender presentation of the same motto. A thematic extension carries the music to the first part of the subsidiary theme, a calm, sedate descending line. As the theme continues, all forward motion seems to cease as the instruments sustain long-held notes in highly chromatic, advanced harmonies. The motifs of the main theme are the subject of the development, in which they steadily rise in pitch and grow in volume before giving way to the recapitulation. Although the coda starts quietly, like the opening, it quickly reaches a high level of concentrated intensity, which it maintains to the end.

Instead of being light and effervescent like Mendelssohn's other scherzos, the second movement is savage and sardonic. The first part is a bizarre dance, with hammered syncopations and harsh dissonances. The brief middle section has the viola and cello playing an implacable *ostinato* line, to which the violins add a macabre waltz-like tune. The opening section is then heard again.

The most personal movement of the quartet is the elegiac Adagio. Growing from the opening phrase, which is shared by the cello and first violin, the music expresses, with great power and conviction, Mendelssohn's deep despair and anguish. The forceful climax is followed by a precipitous drop to the quiet level of the opening and a short final statement of the initial part.

The sonata-form last movement projects a restless anxiety that offers little in the way of solace or acceptance. Despite some loud outburst in the exposition, the two themes, the first a continuing syncopated line, the second with a drooping cadence at the end of every short phrase, are held under tight control. Mendelssohn's wrath, however, emerges in the development, but is mostly muted in the much-shortened recapitulation, only to rise again in the coda.

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