

Konrad Küster

Twice Three is Five, and Other Experiments:
Piano Quartets and String Quintets, 1785-1787

MOZART'S *OEUVRE* IS NOT DOMINATED by any genre or genres in particular, and there is no one type of work above all others that we associate with him in the way that we do Schubert and the Lied, or Wagner and opera. There were years at a stretch in which Mozart wrote no operas. The great period of keyboard concertos occupied only three of his ten years in Vienna. Its sudden end has been connected with the fact that all at once, after a gap of four years, Mozart had the opportunity to write not just one but two operas: *Der Schauspieldirektor* and *Figaro*. The symphony is also 'missing' during the concerto-writing period. Clearly Mozart's concentration on particular genres led for a time to a block where others were concerned; then after a while, some of those others suddenly regained the central position in his interest. In the meanwhile, elements of what the composer had learnt in his most recent works were handed on to the new compositions in other genres.

All the above applies to the string quartets and quintets: neither of them can be called the one predominant medium among Mozart's chamber music for strings, and he concentrated on them in separate periods, several years apart. Here again, interest in the one type seems to have kept him from working on the other, yet, here again, there was some cross-fertilisation.

Mozart's earliest experiments with four- and five-part chamber music for strings belong on the fringes of the divertimento. Apart from the String Quartet, K. 80, composed in Lodi in 1770, there were the three Quartetti-Divertimenti, K. 136-8 (early 1772), which are for strings in four parts (but probably meant to have more than one player to a part). These were followed at relatively short intervals by two groups, each of six quartets: K. 155-60 (1772-3) and K. 168-73 (Vienna, 1773). Then all at once the first quintet came on the scene: K. 174 in B flat major was finished in Salzburg late in 1773, and with it one era ended. It was nearly ten years before the next string quartet was composed. That was K. 387 in G major, the first of the 'Haydn' Quartets, another set of six, which took two years to complete (with the 'Dissonance', 14 January 1785). This time two more years went by before Mozart turned to the quintet again, and in the interval, exceptionally, he wrote one isolated quartet, the 'Hoffmeister', K. 499, dated August 1786.

--©KONRAD KÜSTER. THIS ARTICLE SLIGHTLY ABRIDGED IS TAKEN FROM CHAPTER 29 IN THE BOOK "MOZART: A MUSICAL BIOGRAPHY", BY KONRAD KÜSTER, IN THE TRANSLATION BY MARY WHITTALL AND PUBLISHED BY THE CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD (ISBN 0-19-816339-8), PAGES 250-258.

The next phase of quintet-writing came in the early summer of 1787, with the two works in C major and G minor (K. 515 and 516), and the arrangement of the 'Nacht Musique', K. 388, originally composed for wind octet in 1782 (the string quintet version is K. 406/K⁶ 516b¹). After another gap, the three 'Prussian' Quartets (K. 575, 589, 590) were composed in 1789-90, and like the 1773 quartets these were followed closely by a quintet: K. 593, in D major, 1790. The E flat major Quintet, K. 614, dated April 1791, leaves the impression that Mozart may not yet have begun to think of writing more quartets when he died.

In fact, it is reasonable to suppose that Mozart always wanted to try out what he had discovered in each of his groups of quartets in five-part writing as well, especially in view of the timing of the first and the two last two quintets.² The case of the middle group, the quintets of 1787, is somewhat different. Since the stage of development reached in the 'Dissonance' Quartet, certain fundamental creative circumstances had changed in Mozart's work: the predominant activity of 1784 and 1785, the composition of keyboard concertos, initially involved new orientations (not in matters of form alone: his only two concertos in the minor mode date from this period), but that interest suddenly waned in the course of 1786. Opera composition came back on stream at the end of 1785, and in January 1787 Mozart journeyed to Prague with his first new symphony for years. Moreover, this was only one segment of the soil out of which the quintet compositions of 1787 grew, a soil not directly nourished by the composition of quartets at all; in fact, the quintets had a much broader base among the chamber music as a whole than the 'quartet theory' allows for.

In October 1785, nine months after the composition of the 'Dissonance' Quartet, Mozart finished the Piano Quartet in G minor, K. 478, his very first work for that medium. As indicated, there are a number of signs that he was not concerned here with chamber-music techniques alone but also benefited from the experience of writing his keyboard concertos, where the soloist is pitted against a relatively large body of strings. The effort to assimilate a different area of experience might explain why it took such a relatively long time to finish this first piano quartet; another forerunner is the Quintet for Piano, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon and Horn, K. 452, composed early in 1784. The G minor Piano Quartet set Mozart on another path which remained an enticing prospect although other tasks took priority for the time being (more keyboard concertos and the two operas). However, in the first week in June 1786, exactly five weeks after the première of *Figaro* he wrote a second piano quartet (K. 493, in E flat major). Then, before another five weeks had elapsed, he composed the Piano Trio in G major, K. 496 (his first work in the medium since the Divertimento, K. 254, of 1776); another piano trio followed in the November, but before it there came the 'Kegelstatt' Trio, K. 498, finished on 5 August, and the 'Hoffmeister' Quartet, K. 499, finished exactly two weeks later.

1. On the dating of K⁶ 516b, see A. Tyson, 'Proposed New Dates for Many Works and Fragments Written by Mozart from March 1781 to December 1791', in C. Eisen (ed.), *Mozart Studies* (Oxford, 1991), 213-26, esp. 223.
2. Rosen, *Classical Style*, 264-6.

The dates allow hardly any room for doubt about how to interpret all this. Yes, the operas led to major changes in Mozart's output, but that is not the sole reason why the series of keyboard concertos came to a halt (that Viennese concert-goers had grown tired of Mozart is not the reason, either). Rather, this is yet another example of a genre having served its turn and retreated for a time to the background of his interest. That is how it was with the end of the great period of symphony-writing in 1774, with the farewell to full-scale concertos for the violin in 1775, with the provisional abandonment of fugue at the end of 1783 (so far as surviving compositions allow us to judge); and that too is how the alternation between string quartets and quintets came about. There are perhaps already signs that the composition of keyboard concertos was losing its appeal for Mozart at the turn of the year 1785-6: for example, the fact that he made his last experiment with recapitulation in first-movement concerto form, in the E flat major Concerto, K. 482, and did not set himself any comparably ambitious goals in any of the later concertos. These appear to have been composed under intense pressure: he turned to old sketches for the A major Concerto, K. 488, the C major, K. 503, and the B flat major, K. 595, and in the case of the 'Coronation' Concerto, K. 537, he did not even have time to write out the solo part in full in the autograph score. Only the C minor Concerto, K. 491, may have offered him a special challenge, by the fact that it was in the minor.

To that extent there are also internal reasons within his keyboard concerto output that might have made Mozart decide to seek fresh woods and pastures new. In addition to the return to the opera-house, it looks as if experimentation with chamber-music techniques pushed concerto-composition into the background, especially, to begin with, chamber music with keyboard. It is probably no coincidence that in the Quintet, K. 452, the forerunner of the 1786 chamber works, the piano appears in the company of wind instruments, not strings. Here the bass function falls to the bassoon, an instrument which Mozart had long credited with the agility that he asked of the cello only from the later 'Haydn' Quartets onwards. The agile cello is, however, a *sine qua non* in the new forms of chamber music for strings and keyboard. The step which Mozart took in the later 'Haydn' Quartets led to its ultimate consequence, therefore, in the 'String Quintet', K. 406, his arrangement of the 'Nacht Musique', K. 388: the bassoon part was given to the cello.

The Piano Quartet in G minor, K. 478, represents an earlier stage on that journey, the first in some respects since the exploration of new possibilities in the 'Haydn' Quartets. The concerto techniques adhering to the piano-strings relationship make it possible for Mozart to take what he had learnt about chamber-music techniques in writing the 'Haydn' Quartets and develop it along new lines. In the second Piano Quartet (E flat major, K. 493) these techniques still owe much to concertante style, as is shown in the development of the first movement: a theme from the exposition (the 'sujet libre' from the modulation) is elaborated in a manner akin to sonata form; after the development has opened in a thoroughly concerto-like manner, this theme lies almost exclusively in the strings, for the piano takes no part in its elaboration (apart from the opening and a brief unison passage) but instead develops its own completely independent and purely virtuosic figuration.

This antithesis of virtuosity (for the 'soloist') and thematic working (for the 'orchestra') is entirely typical of Mozart's concerto movements.³ For that reason the next step, Mozart's true 'conquest' of the piano trio, also seems to be a further scaling-down of concerto techniques to the chamber-music context rather than any direct borrowing from violin-sonata style.⁴

In his further progress along the path on which he had started two and a half years earlier with the Piano and Wind Quintet and continued with the first 'genuine' piano quartet, Mozart spent the summer and autumn of 1786 surveying the possibilities. One of the works of that period was a string quartet pure and simple, and even the orchestral compositions can probably be said to have contributed new ideas, the 'Prague' as a symphony, and the C major Piano Concerto, K. 503, as a work using traditional concertante forms. One last step led to the string quintets; with that the survey was completed, and of all the genres Mozart had experimented with, only the piano trio retained its attraction for him. In the next few years, until the string quartet reentered the field with the 'Prussian' set, the alternatives were, on the one hand, the numerically smallest possible medium with keyboard but going beyond the character of the violin sonata, and, on the other hand, a string-only medium exceeding the four-part limit: thus, in both cases, the criteria for concertante style were met. What were the advantages of writing for string quintet, and were they so decisive that categorization in these terms can really be sustained?⁵

Mozart's string quintets always have the same combination of two violins and two violas performing on the bass platform provided by a cello. So far as that goes, the first intimation of the musical possibilities of this structure is already present in the first of his quintets, K. 174, where the two violins and the two violas form clear pairs, sometimes modified in the course of events to the extent that new pairs form, of violin and viola; the cello is excluded from these pairings and is employed as bass by all the various pairs. It is another instance recalling the baroque trio sonata, except for the doubling of the number of melody instruments from two to four, and for the bass's loss of its thorough-bass function (expounded in chords on a keyboard instrument). The process demonstrates the significance that groups of three can have in the quintet and this is in fact one of the string quintet's fundamental advantages over the quartet.

The emancipation of the cello from a purely bass function in the later 'Haydn' Quartets had two consequences for Mozart's chamber music for strings: not only does the music now provide a platform for another virtuoso, but also, when an important solo falls to the cello, the remaining instruments have to take the role of accompanists. The way the latter affects the formation of trios within a quintet is illustrated in the opening bars of the first of the 1787 quintets (C major, K. 515), where the solo function alternates between cello and first violin, while the second violin and the two violas accompany as a trio.

3. Küster, *Formale Aspekte*, 142. 4. K. Marguerre, 'Mozarts Klaviertrios', *MJb* 1960-I, 182-94. 5. On the quintet medium in general, see T. Seiber, *Das klassische Streichquintett* (Berne and Munich, 1983).

This goes even further at the start of the G minor Quintet, K. 516. It begins with a 'trio', made up of the two violins and the first viola. After eight bars the opening music is repeated (with a slightly different ending) but this time it is heard an octave lower on the two violas and the cello, with the violas playing the music originally given to the violins, and the cello that of the viola. Nothing of that kind happened in the early B flat major Quintet (K. 174); there, even when the violas relieved the violins in the upper parts, the third voice was always the cello (except for two places in the Adagio, when the bass line goes to the second viola). The way the first viola functions as the bass in the opening bars in K. 516, when it has hitherto been either the leader of the pair of violas or the partner of the first violin, is radically new compared to the earlier quintet, and the novelty can only be explained by the fact that the former hierarchies have been put into question by the emancipation of the cello in chamber music (although even now it still performs its traditional bass function).

Thus the appearance that a string quintet may consist of two string trios is present even in the first work Mozart wrote for the medium, but there it is better understood as a relic of an enriched trio-sonata praxis. The situation is totally different in the G minor Quintet. The antithesis of a high trio and a low trio, set out in its opening bars, would make no such impression in a string quartet, for example, because there both groups would necessarily include a violin: the sound-character of two 'trios' would be differentiated only by the constitution of the bass register (viola with two violins in one case, cello with violin and viola in the other).

In a quintet constituted as 'twice three', on the other hand, one of the five players always has to assume a dual role, as the cellist once did, and at the start of the G minor Quintet this is the fate of the first viola. It begins as a high bass, then it switches to the leading role, so that it performs an axial function in the texture here. Six-part writing for five instruments can conceivably take a different form, however, as turns out midway through the finale of the work (bars 192 ff.). Here too a high trio and a low one confront each other, but this time the cello takes the melody from the first violin, and the second viola draws on the part of the second violin. In these circumstances, the axial character of the first viola is rather special, because all it does in the context of the low trio is develop the material that it already had when it belonged to the high one, while the other components of the texture appear mirrored around its 'bass' part.

With these limitless possibilities for reconstructing the textures, Mozart's quintet style in 1787 draws close to one species of concertante music, namely the chamber concerto, in which each part is taken by a soloist, without any orchestral accompaniment (the sixth 'Brandenburg' Concerto, for example). Regarding the string quintets as a special form of the chamber concerto, and the piano trios and quartets as special forms—"for the chamber"—of the piano concerto, offers an additional explanation of the direction in which Mozart's new ideas about concerto form took him after the period of concentration on the piano concerto was over. He had his eye not only on opera but also on the possibility of uniting his manifold discoveries in concerto techniques with his advances in the field of chamber music—the violin sonata as well as the string quartet.

Another tradition which contributed to Mozart's quintets can be seen in the order of the movements in the G minor Quintet: having the minuet in second place is a symptom of influence by the divertimento. The choice of tonality in the finale, on the other hand, reflects an advance made in the concertante music: as in the D minor Piano Concerto, and above all the G minor Piano Quintet, here too the music switches to the major. The divertimento appears to leave a particularly strong mark on the C minor Quintet, K. 406, the string-quintet arrangement of the Serenade in C minor for winds, K. 388, which Mozart made at much the same time as composing K. 515 and K. 516, but it was already implicit in the title ("Nacht Musique") of the original scoring for wind octet.

Mozart offered the three quintets (the two new works and the arrangement) for sale by subscription, in manuscript copies, in April 1788, approximately a year after their composition. The venture seems to have failed, however, because he advertised the subscription for a second time in the *Wiener Zeitung* two months later, and then one of them (K. 515) was issued in print by Artaria in the following year. In 1789, Mozart went to Berlin, whence he returned with a renewed interest in composing quartets, which gave birth to the three 'Prussian' works. The techniques of writing chamber music for strings which he had evolved in the quintets of 1787 must have been in the forefront of his mind in these new works, and at least in the matter of grouping the voices, he reached a conclusion that was not perhaps foreseeable from the quintets: the last of the 'Prussian' quartets illustrates how "five-part" (or even, to some extent, "six-part") writing can be achieved with only four instruments.

This is the appropriate moment to discuss this culminating stage in the evolution of what is strictly speaking a typical quintet technique. The slow second movement of the last 'Prussian' Quartet begins decorously enough in four parts, in a characteristic quaver rhythm. Subsequently the four-part chordal texture is relaxed, and the music modulates out of the home key. In bar 63, however, the home key suddenly returns, bringing with it the quaver rhythm of the movement's opening. Exactly the same notes are played as at the start, but by means of double-stopping the first violin now also plays the notes that were earlier played by the viola, thus leaving the viola at liberty to do something else (it interjects short dotted figures into the texture). By this relatively simple tactic the music is now in five parts.

But Mozart has not finished yet. Eight bars later, the quaver theme appears yet again, played only by the second violin and the viola. The cello develops a new, independent part, derived from the earlier viola figure, while the first violin rests. In the next bar, the first violin takes over the cello figuration, but the cello, instead of resting, joins the two other instruments in the material from the opening bars.

The outcome in this case does not actually amount to setting up two pairs of trios, as at the beginning of the G minor String Quintet, but the four-instrument basis has been developed to form new structures that go back to quintet technique. The cello is not only the first violin's partner in a framing function, fitting round a three-part inner texture (as at the start of the C major String Quintet, K. 515), but also its part is as ambivalent as that of the first viola in the opening bars of the G minor Quintet, for it switches to and fro between the functions of melody and bass, from one bar to the next. The three-part writing for the inner voices here is by no means an exciting expansion of technical possibilities: on the other hand the two distinct parts given to the cello appear to be the fruit of the cogitations which stamp Mozart's 1787 quintets on the basis of the chamber works from the 1786 exploration. There Mozart worked out a textural structure which at first sight seems realizable only in quintets⁶—yet, when pushed, it is capable of transference to the quartet medium, in works in which the emancipation of the cello enables it to reach a new pinnacle.

Konrad Küster

6. On the question of chordal structure, see M. Flothuis, *Mozart, Streichquintett g-Moll, KV 516* (Munich, 1987), 6