

Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus – String Quartet no 15 in D minor, K421

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Andante
- III. Menuetto (Allegretto) - Trio
- IV. Allegretto ma non troppo

When Mozart arrived in Vienna in 1781, Haydn held a reputation as the most celebrated composer of his age. Even though Mozart never formally studied with Haydn, his music exerted a profound influence on the young composer. This influence was particularly evident in the string quartet, which Haydn had virtually invented as a genre. His String Quartets Op.33, published in 1781, impressed the young Mozart, written as they were in a new way that made the four instruments equal participants in the musical discourse, with the cello freed from merely supplying the bass line. After a thorough study of these works, Mozart set about to compose his own six quartets composed between late 1782 and early 1785, known collectively as the “Haydn” Quartets as they were dedicated to his esteemed mentor. These six quartets show Mozart at the peak of his creative power. Unusual for the time, they were written solely on the basis of inspiration, not commission.

Composed in June 1783, K. 421 is the second of the “Haydn” Quartets and the only one in a minor key. The Allegro first movement, in the customary sonata form, begins with a brooding D minor main theme which paints an ominous mood, very different from what we usually expect from the ebullient Mozart. The more lyrical second subject is presented in a brighter contrasting key, though its accompaniment maintains the sense of urgency and premonition of the preceding music. Both melodies are introduced by the first violin, which clearly plays the leading role in the ensemble. But Mozart’s conception of the string quartet, like Haydn’s, was fundamentally egalitarian, and he apportions the thematic material among the four instruments in a democratic fashion. The inner voices, in particular, are full of interest and variety. A tiny repeated-note triplet figure heard at the close of the exposition in the first violin serves as a motif that recurs in later movements. The development section is an intricate thematic workout with some bold harmonies. The recapitulation and coda iterate the strong emotions and masterful craftsmanship of this deeply affective music.

The Andante which follows starts out as a gentle, halting dance, sombre but tender, initially in the traditional relative key of F major but reverting much of the time to the darker D minor mode. The music is lyrical and the movement has a quiet dignity.

The Minuet continues in D minor in a more strident tone recapturing the turbulent emotion of the first movement. Here Mozart pushes the minuet far beyond its origins as a stately dance, exploring contrasts of tonality, texture, mood, and rhythm. By contrast, the Trio is a pleasant Viennese serenade complete with plucked string accompaniment in imitation of a guitar. Huge leaps in the first violin are reminiscent of Haydn’s witticisms.

The finale movement is a set of variations on a sad melody in the 6/8 time of a

'siciliano', an Italian pastoral dance form. Brisk, dark, angry and still in D minor, it showcases each of the four instruments with virtuosic solos in variations notable for their harmonic elasticity. A brisk coda reaffirms the home key and brings the quartet to an exhilarating close.

Elizabeth Dalton, 2016