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W.A. Mozart (1756-1791) Divertimento for String Trio in Eb K.563 (1788)

Allegro

Adagio

Menuetto: Allegretto

Andante

Menuetto: Allegretto

Allegro

The start of the Austro-Turkish war in February 1788 was not good for Mozart's fortunes. Food prices rose and many aristocratic families fled Vienna to avoid conscription. His finances were already strained and he was apparently unwilling to economise on a lifestyle developed in better times – a spacious apartment, horse and carriage. The kindness of Michael von Puchberg made things easier for Mozart. Puchberg was a textile merchant, amateur violinist and fellow freemason who responded generously to Mozart's increasingly desperate pleas for financial help. In acknowledgment of this magnanimity Mozart wrote the K.563 Divertimento for Puchberg. It was finished in September 1788 and first performed in April 1789 in Dresden where Mozart was en route to Berlin in search of royal commissions, hitching a ride from Vienna with Prince Karl Lichnowsky. Mozart himself played viola in the performance.

The work is one of the first for the combination of violin, viola and cello, and has a depth and intensity that goes beyond previous Divertimenti, although it preserves their typically 6-movement form. Ten or so years later it provided a model for Beethoven's masterly six-movement Op 3 Divertimento also in E-flat and his subsequent three wonderful Op 9 string trios.

On casual listening to this remarkable work, few people would notice that there were just three rather than the more usual quartet of string players, and this is achieved without Mozart resorting to double stops except on a bare handful of occasions. To achieve this harmonic and contrapuntal richness, the viola is worked harder than in a typical quartet, but is rewarded by the thought of sitting beside Mozart revelling in the wonders of his writing.

The opening could not be simpler: a unison descending arpeggio in minims in the home key of E-flat (*illustrated*). Yet it provides thematic material for the whole work, most immediately as a faster rising arpeggio two bars later and then as a yet more rapid rising scale in bar 6. The sonata form first movement elaborates these motifs along with a contrasting second subject. Although Mozart rarely composed works in remote keys, the start of the development section shows the ease with which he can modulate briefly into the remotest of keys, here demanding an E-sharp of the viola – a note previously unplayed by this amateur violist!



The arpeggio rises in the cello's opening of the A-flat major *Adagio* second movement and is immediately elaborated by the violin. Again the development explores the outer reaches of keydom (an F-flat this time!) with Mozart perhaps revelling in the challenge of convincingly negotiating extreme harmonic changes with only three parts.

Falling arpeggios again make up the theme of the third movement's *Menuetto (illustrated)* with a contrasting upwards creeping and then sliding down figure in its *Trio*.



The following *Andante* is a very substantial movement and an interesting take on Theme and Variations. The first 8 bars of the theme are followed by a variation on them, then the second 8 bars of the theme are followed by their variation. This pairwise pattern is repeated twice more before the sombre sixth variation in the minor leads us back into the major and a completely different sort of variation. The violin (demi-semi-quavers) plays twice as fast as the cello (semi-quavers) while the viola rather smugly plays a very leisurely skeletal version of the theme before taking over the violin's demis and then handing them on to the cello. The movement ends with violin and cello playing the first two bars of the theme in canon.

The last movement is a rollocking rondo (with the viola working hard on accompanying arpeggio triplets) with which Mozart brings to a triumphant end what Alfred Einstein called "one of his noblest works".