

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MOZART'S INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC.

NEXT to pianoforte music for amateur musical entertainments, the quartet for stringed instruments was the favourite form of chamber music. The performers were occasionally highly cultivated amateurs, but more often professional musicians, thus giving scope for more pretentious compositions. The comparatively small expense involved enabled others besides noblemen, even those of the citizen class who were so inclined, to include quartet-playing among their regular entertainments.¹ Jos. Haydn was, as is well known, the musician who gave to the quartet its characteristic form and development.² Other composers had written works for four stringed instruments, but the string quartet in its well-defined and henceforth stationary constitution was his creation, the result of his life-work. It is seldom that an artist has been so successful in discovering the fittest outcome for his individual productiveness; the quartet was Haydn's natural expression of his musical nature. The freshness and life, the cheerful joviality, which are the main characteristics of his compositions, gained ready and universal acceptance for them. Connoisseurs and critics, it is true, were at first suspicious, and even contemptuous, of this new kind of music; and it was only gradually that they became aware that depth and earnestness of feeling, as well as knowledge and skill, existed together with humour in Haydn's quartets. He went on his way, however, untroubled

¹ The Greiners had quartet parties every Tuesday during Advent and Lent (Car. Pichler, *Denkw.*, I., p. 127. *Jahrb. d. Tonk.*, 1796, p. 71).

² Luigi Boccherini (1740-1805), who was almost a contemporary, followed his own bent in numerous quartets, quintets, and trios, uninfluenced by the works of others, and not himself exerting any lasting influence (Piquot, *Notice sur la Vie et les Ouvrages de L. Boccherini*. Paris, 1851).

by the critics, and secured the favour and adherence of the public by an unbroken series of works: whoever ventured on the same field was obliged to serve under his banner.

The widespread popularity of quartet music in Vienna could not fail to impel Mozart to try his forces in this direction. His master was also his attached friend and fellow-artist, with whom he stood in the position, not of a scholar, but of an independent artist in noble emulation. The first six quartets belong to the comparatively less numerous works which Mozart wrote for his own pleasure, without any special external impulse. They are, as he says in the dedication to Haydn, the fruit of long and earnest application, and extended over a space of several years. The first, in G major (387 K.), was, according to a note on the autograph manuscript, written on December 31, 1782; the second, in D minor (421 K.), in June, 1783, during Constanze's confinement (Vol. II., p. 423); and the third, in E flat major (428 K.), belongs to the same year. After a somewhat lengthy pause he returned with new zeal to the composition of the quartets; the fourth, in B flat major (458 K.), was written November 9, 1784; the fifth, in A major (464 K.), on January 10; and the last, in C major (465 K.), on January 14, 1785. It was in February of this year that Leopold Mozart paid his visit to Vienna. He knew the first three quartets, Wolfgang having sent them to him according to custom; and he heard the others at a musical party where Haydn was also present; the warmly expressed approbation of the latter may have been the immediate cause of Mozart's graceful dedication, when he published the quartets during the autumn of 1785 (Op. 11).³

The popular judgment is usually founded on comparison, and a comparison with Haydn's quartets was even more obvious than usual on this occasion. The Emperor Joseph, who objected to Haydn's "tricks and nonsense" (Vol. II.,

³ The advertisement (Wien. Ztg., 1785, No. 75, p. 2191) ran: "Mozart's works require no praise, and to quote any would be superfluous; we can only assure the public that we are offering them a masterpiece. This is confirmed by the fact that the quartets are dedicated to his friend Joseph Haydn, Kapellmeister to Prince Esterhazy, who honoured them with all the approbation which one man of genius can bestow upon another."

MOZART AND KLOPSTOCK.

3

p. 204), requested Dittersdorf in 1786 to draw a parallel between Haydn's and Mozart's chamber music. Dittersdorf answered by requesting the Emperor in his turn to draw a parallel between Klopstock and Gellert; whereupon Joseph replied that both were great poets, but that Klopstock must be read repeatedly in order to understand his beauties, whereas Gellert's beauties lay plainly exposed to the first glance. Dittersdorf's analogy of Mozart with Klopstock, Haydn with Gellert (!), was readily accepted by the Emperor, who further compared Mozart's compositions to a snuffbox of Parisian manufacture, Haydn's to one manufactured in London.⁴ The Emperor looked at nothing deeper than the respective degrees of taste displayed by the two musicians, and could find no better comparison for works of art than articles of passing fancy; whereas the composer had regard to the inner essence of the works, and placed them on the same footing as those of the (in his opinion) greatest poets of Germany. However odd may appear to us—admiring as we do, above all things in Mozart, his clearness and purity of form—Dittersdorf's comparison of him with Klopstock, it is nevertheless instructive, as showing that his contemporaries prized his grandeur and dignity, and the force and boldness of his expression, as his highest and most distinguishing qualities. L. Mozart used also to say, that his son was in music what Klopstock was in poetry;⁵ no doubt because Klopstock was to him the type of all that was deep and grand. But the public did not regard the new phenomenon in the same light; the quality they esteemed most highly in Haydn's quartets was their animated cheerfulness; and his successors, Dittersdorf, Pichl, Pleyel, had accustomed them even to lighter enjoyments. "It is a pity," says a favourable critic, in a letter from Vienna (January, 1787), "that in his truly artistic and beautiful compositions Mozart should carry his effort after originality too far, to the detriment of the sentiment and heart of his works. His new quartets, dedicated to Haydn, are much too highly spiced to be palatable for any length

⁴ Dittersdorf, *Selbstbiogr.*, p. 238.

⁵ Nissen, *Nachtrag*, p. 62.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-06484-2 - Life of Mozart: Volume 3
 Otto Jahn Translated by Pauline D. Townsend
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

4

MOZART'S INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC.

of time."⁶ Prince Grassalovicz, a musical connoisseur of rank in Vienna,⁷ had the quartets performed, as Mozart's widow relates,⁸ and was so enraged at finding that the discords played by the musicians were really in the parts, that he tore them all to pieces—but Gyrowetz's symphonies pleased him very much. From Italy also the parts were sent back to the publisher, as being full of printer's errors, and even Sarti undertook to prove, in a violent criticism, that some of the music in these quartets was insupportable from its wilful offences against rule and euphony. The chief stumbling-block is the well-known introduction of the C major quartet—



the harshness of which irritates the expectant ear. Its grammatical justification has been repeatedly given in learned analyses.⁹ Haydn is said to have declared, during a dispute over this passage, that if Mozart wrote it so, he must have had his reasons for doing it¹⁰—a somewhat am-

⁶ Cramer, *Magazin der Musik*, II., p. 1273.

⁷ Gyrowetz, *Selbstbiogr.*, p. 11. *Jahrb. d. Tonkunst*, 1796, p. 77.

⁸ *A. M. Z.*, I., p. 855.

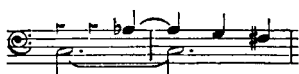
Fétis attacked this introduction in the *Revue Musicale*, V., p. 601, and maintained his opinion against Pernes (*Ibid.*, VI., pp. 25, 32). An equally lively onslaught upon Fétis was made in a detailed analysis by C. A. Leduc (*A. M. Z.*, XXXII., p. 117), and renewed (*A. M. Z.*, XXXIII., pp. 81, 101) after an answer by Fétis (*Rev. Mus.*, VIII., p. 821), and also by C. M. Balthasar (*A. M. Z.*, XXXIII., p. 493). Thereupon G. Weber subjected the passage to a searching examination, and acknowledged finally that the combinations of sound were displeasing to his own ear.

¹⁰ *Cécilia*, XIV., p. 2.

QUARTETS, 1785.

5

biguous remark. Ulibicheff¹¹ undertook to correct the passage with the aid of Fétis,¹² and then considered it both fine and pleasing; and Lenz¹³ declared that Mozart in “this delightful expression of the doctrine of necessary evil, founded on the insufficiency of all finite things” had produced a piquant, but not an incorrect passage. It is certain, at least, that Mozart intended to write the passage as it stands, and his meaning in so doing, let the grammatical construction be what it will, will not be obscure to sympathetic hearers. The C major quartet, the last of this first set, is the only one with an introduction. The frame of mind expressed in it is a noble, manly cheerfulness, rising in the andante to an almost supernatural serenity—the kind of cheerfulness which, in life or in art, appears only as the result of previous pain and strife. The sharp accents of the first and second movements, the struggling agony of the trio to the minuet, the wonderful depth of beauty in the subject of the finale, startling us by its entry, first in E flat and then in A flat major, are perhaps the most striking illustrations of this, but the introduction stands forth as the element which gives birth to all the happy serenity of the work. The contrast between the troubled, depressed phrase—



and the shrill agitated one—



has a direct effect upon the hearer; both phrases have one solution:—



¹¹ Ulibicheff, II., p. 254.

¹² The conjecture of Fétis that the first violin follows the second at the second instead of the third crotchet of the second bar, by reason of a printer's error, is disproved by Mozart's own manuscript (also by his Thematic Catalogue).

¹³ Lenz, Beethoven, II., p. 78.

The manner in which they are opposed to each other, and the devices by which their opposition is thrown into strong relief, are of unusual, but by no means unjustifiable, harshness. But the goal is not reached by one bound; no sooner does serenity seem to be attained than the recurrence of the *b* draws the clouds together again, and peace and the power of breathing and moving freely are only won by slow and painful degrees.¹⁴

Any difference of opinion as to this work at the present day can only exist with regard to minor details, and it will scarcely now be asserted by any one that "a piece may be recognised as Mozart's by its rapid succession of daring transitions."¹⁵ We are accustomed to take our standard from Beethoven, and it seems to us almost incredible that a contemporary of Mozart's, the Stuttgart Hofmusicus, Schaul (who acknowledged, it is true, that he belonged to a time when nothing was heard but Italian operas and musicians), should exclaim: ¹⁶—

What a gulf between a Mozart and a Boccherini! The former leads us over rugged rocks on to a waste, sparsely strewn with flowers; the latter through smiling country, flowery meadows, and by the side of rippling streams.

Apart from all differences of opinion or analogies with other works, it may safely be asserted that these quartets are the clear and perfect expression of Mozart's nature; nothing less is to be expected from a work upon which he put forth all his powers in order to accomplish something that would redound to his master Haydn's honour as well as his own. The form had already, in all its essential points, been determined by Haydn; it is the sonata form, already described, with the addition of the minuet—in this application a creation of Haydn's. Mozart appropriated these main

¹⁴ The same object is entirely fulfilled by Beethoven in the introduction to the Symphony in B flat major, to say nothing of the Quartet in C major. The cheerful serenity pervading the symphony, and the occasional stronger accents of passionate feeling, are, as it were, prefigured in the introduction, where we hear the rolling of the storm which is to clear and freshen the atmosphere.

¹⁵ A. M. Z., III., p. 350.

¹⁶ Joh. Bapt. Schaul, Briefe über den Geschmack in der Musik, p. 8.

features, without feeling it incumbent on him even to alter them. Following a deeply rooted impulse of his nature, he renounced the light and fanciful style in which Haydn had treated them, seized upon their legitimate points, and gave a firmer and more delicate construction to the whole fabric. To say of Mozart's quartets in their general features that, in comparison with Haydn's, they are of deeper and fuller expression, more refined beauty, and broader conception of form,¹⁷ is only to distinguish these as Mozart's individual characteristics, in contrast with Haydn's inexhaustible fund of original and humorous productive power. Any summary comparison of the two masters must result in undue depreciation of one or the other, for nothing but a detailed examination would do full justice to them both and explain their admiration of each other. Two circumstances must not be left out of account. Mozart's quartets are few in number compared with the long list of Haydn's. Every point that is of interest in Mozart may be paralleled in Haydn; hence it follows that certain peculiarities found in Haydn's music are predominating elements in Mozart's. Again, Haydn was a much older man, and is therefore usually regarded as Mozart's predecessor; but the compositions on which his fame chiefly rests belong for the most part to the period of Mozart's activity in Vienna, and were not without important influence on the latter. This mutual reaction, so generously acknowledged by both musicians, must be taken into account in forming a judgment upon them.

The string quartet offers the most favourable conditions for the development of instrumental music, both as to expression and technical construction, giving free play to the composer in every direction, provided only that he keep within the limits imposed by the nature of his art. Each of the four combined instruments is capable of the greatest variety of melodic construction; they have the advantage over the piano in their power of sustaining the vibrations of the notes, so as to produce song-like effects; nor are they inferior

¹⁷ Cf. Musik. Briefe von einem Wohlbekannten, II., p. 40.

in their power of rapid movement. Their union enables them to fulfil the demands of complete harmonies, and to compensate by increase of freedom and fulness for the advantages which the pianoforte possesses as a solo instrument. The quartet is therefore particularly well adapted both for the polyphonic and the homophonic style of composition. The varieties of tone of the instruments among each other, and of each in different keys, further increases their capacity for expression, the *nuances* of tone-colouring appearing to belong to the nature of stringed instruments. Thus the material sound elements of the string quartet are singularly uniform, at the same time that they allow free scope to the individual movement of the component parts. The beginning of the andante of the E flat major quartet (428 K.) will suffice to show how entirely different an effect is given by a mere difference in the position of the parts. The value which Mozart set upon the uniformity of the naturally beautiful sound effects of stringed instruments may be inferred from the fact that he seldom attempted interference with it as a device for pleasing the ear. Pizzicato passages occur only three times—in the trio of the D minor quartet (421 K.), of the C major quintet (515 K.), and of the clarinet quintet (581 K.)—and each time as the gentlest form of accompaniment to a tender melody. He was not prone either to emphasise bass passages by pizzicato, and has done so only in the second adagio of the G minor quintet (516 K.) and in the first movement of the horn quintet (407 K.). Nor is the muting, formerly so frequent, made use of except in the first adagio of the G minor quartet and in the larghetto of the clarinet quintet. It need scarcely be said that an equal amount of technical execution and musical proficiency was presupposed in each of the performers. This is especially noticeable in the treatment of the violoncello. It is not only put on a level with the other instruments as to execution, but its many-sided character receives due recognition, and it is raised from the limited sphere of a bass part into one of complete independence.

The favourite comparison of the quartet with a conversation between four intellectual persons holds good in some

MOZART'S STRING QUARTETS.

9

degree, if it is kept in mind that the intellectual participation and sympathy of the interlocutors, although not necessarily languishing in conversation, are only audibly expressed by turns, whereas the musical embodiment of ideas must be continuous and simultaneous. The comparison is intended to illustrate the essential point that every component part of the quartet stands out independently, according to its character, but so diffidently that all co-operate to produce a whole which is never at any moment out of view; an effect so massive as to absorb altogether the individual parts would be as much out of place as the undue emphasising of any one part and the subordination of the others to it. The object to be kept continually in view is the blending of the homophonic or melodious, and the polyphonic or formal elements of composition to form a new and living creation. Neither is neglected; but neither is allowed to assert itself too prominently. Even when a melody is delivered by one instrument alone, the others do not readily confine themselves to a merely harmonic accompaniment, but preserve their independence of movement. Infallible signs of a master-hand are visible in the free and ingenious adaptation of the bass and the middle parts to the melodies; and, as a rule, the characteristic disposition of the parts gives occasion for a host of interesting harmonic details. The severer forms of counterpoint only appear in exceptional cases, such as the last movement of the first quartet, in G major (387 K.). The intention is not to work out a subject in a given form, but to play freely with it, presenting it from various interesting points of view by means of combinations, analysis, construction, and connection with fresh contrasting elements. But since this free play can only be accepted as artistic by virtue of the internal coherency of its component parts, it follows that the same laws which govern strict forms must lie at the root of the freer construction. In the same way a conversation—even though severe logical disputation may be studiously avoided—adheres to the laws of logic while letting fall here a main proposition, there a subordinate idea, and connecting apparent incongruities by means of association of ideas. A similar freedom in the grouping and

