

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 19 October 2025
7.30pm

Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre violin

Harumi Rhodes violin

Richard O'Neill viola

András Fejér cello

Timothy Ridout viola

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quintet in C K515 (1787)

*I. Allegro • II. Menuetto. Allegretto •
III. Andante • IV. Allegro*

Interval

String Quintet in G minor K516 (1787)

*I. Allegro • II. Menuetto: Allegretto •
III. Adagio ma non troppo • IV. Adagio – Allegro*



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On 4 April 1787, Mozart wrote from Vienna to his father Leopold, in Salzburg:

'Now I hear that you are really ill! I need not tell you how much I am longing to hear some reassuring news from you; and indeed, I confidently expect such news, although I have made it a habit to imagine the worst in all situations. Since Death, if we think about it soberly, is the true and ultimate purpose of our life, I have formed during the last few years such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind that its image holds nothing terrifying for me any more, but is indeed very soothing and consoling!

And I thank God for graciously granting me the insight (you know what I mean) of learning that death is the key which unlocks the door to our true happiness. I never lie down at night without reflecting that perhaps, young as I am, I may not live to see another day. And yet no one who knows me could say that I am morose or dejected in company – and for this blessing I thank my creator daily.'

15 days later, on 19 April, he entered in his personal catalogue a new string quintet in C major – the work we know as K515. On 16 May, he finished a further string quintet, in G minor (K516). A fortnight later, on 28 May, Leopold Mozart died in Salzburg at the age of 68.

Mozart was famously adept at detaching his creative work from his personal life. Almost nowhere in his wonderfully vivid letters do we find any direct suggestion that his emotional state has informed his music. But we're free to make our own connections. Which is useful because, as is so often the case with even Mozart's most ambitious chamber works, we know frustratingly little about the origins of these two quintets.

But we do know the dates of their completion, and we can guess that Mozart intended them primarily for publication, rather than any specific performance. String quintets with two violas were a saleable commodity in 1780s Vienna: Mozart's new quintets shared the field with (among others) quintets by Pleyel, Hoffmeister and Mozart's former Salzburg colleague Michael Haydn, as well as his own early essay, K174 (1773). By June 1788, he seems to have been hawking the new quintets to publishers. 'By next week I will definitely have received my subscription money' he told his brother-Freemason Michael Puchberg, hopefully.

It's not much to go on. For anyone who knows these two works, it's almost nothing. Commentators have remarked upon the 'duality' of Mozart's creative personality – suggesting that he was at his most inspired, and most personal, when writing for a pair of leading (melody-carrying) voices. Think of his concertos (and, above all, the *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin and viola); of any number of opera arias, and of chamber works like the Clarinet Quintet. Think, also, of

the many instances in Mozart's output of pairs of emotionally-contrasting masterpieces, often written within weeks of each other: the 40th and 41st symphonies; the piano quartets K478 and K493, and the 20th and 21st piano concertos. In each case, an intense minor key work counterbalances a partner-work in an expansive major key, like a creative reflex action.

The C major quintet could hardly be more expansive (it's Mozart's single longest four-movement work). Its opening sets the tone; the striding cello and *cantabile* first violin answering each other to create a two-part main theme that unites the very bottom and the very top of the quintet's range. The confidence – and breadth – is magnificent, launching a movement whose proportions and sheer wealth of invention, are unsurpassed in Mozart's chamber music (this exposition has at least six distinct themes).

That large-scale mastery shapes every bar of the quintet, from the open-air, horn-calling pairs of the *Minuetto*, through to the graceful wit and smiling generosity that informs the big, sunlit rondo-finale. In the bittersweet harmonies of the trio and the delicate balance of light and shade that colours the outer movements – and, above all, in the long, gloriously blossoming operatic love duet for viola and violin that lifts the *Andante* into the realm of the transcendent – the quintet is unfailingly as intimate as it is open.

And then think of the spare textures, explosive full-ensemble tuttis and sighing chromatic melodies the G minor quintet. Mozart, as ever, commands both darkness and sunlight: notice the way that the intense and despairing mood of the first movement is carried over into the minuet (which would usually serve as light relief), and the way the muted instruments in the third movement create a hushed and withdrawn sound-world to match the change in emotional mood. The slow introduction to the finale is also unique in Mozart: bitter G minor darkness resolving into a sunlit G major *Allegro*. To a man of the Enlightenment (and a Christian), an optimistic conclusion was the only rational – indeed moral – way to resolve the sorrows that are made so explicit throughout this profoundly emotional work.

So we return to that letter. It's one of Mozart's clearest explanations (in words, anyway) of his personal beliefs; his awareness of mortality, and the counterbalancing optimism and comfort he derived from his religious faith and the precepts ('insight – you know what I mean...') of Freemasonry. Reading Mozart's words, it's possible to understand how two such different works could flower from the same creative impulse. And how, at a time of such deep personal anxiety, he could create music of such optimism, courage and humanity. Mozart's 'insight' enabled him not only to stare into the abyss, but to stare back, with supreme creative confidence.

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