8 Mozart's chamber music

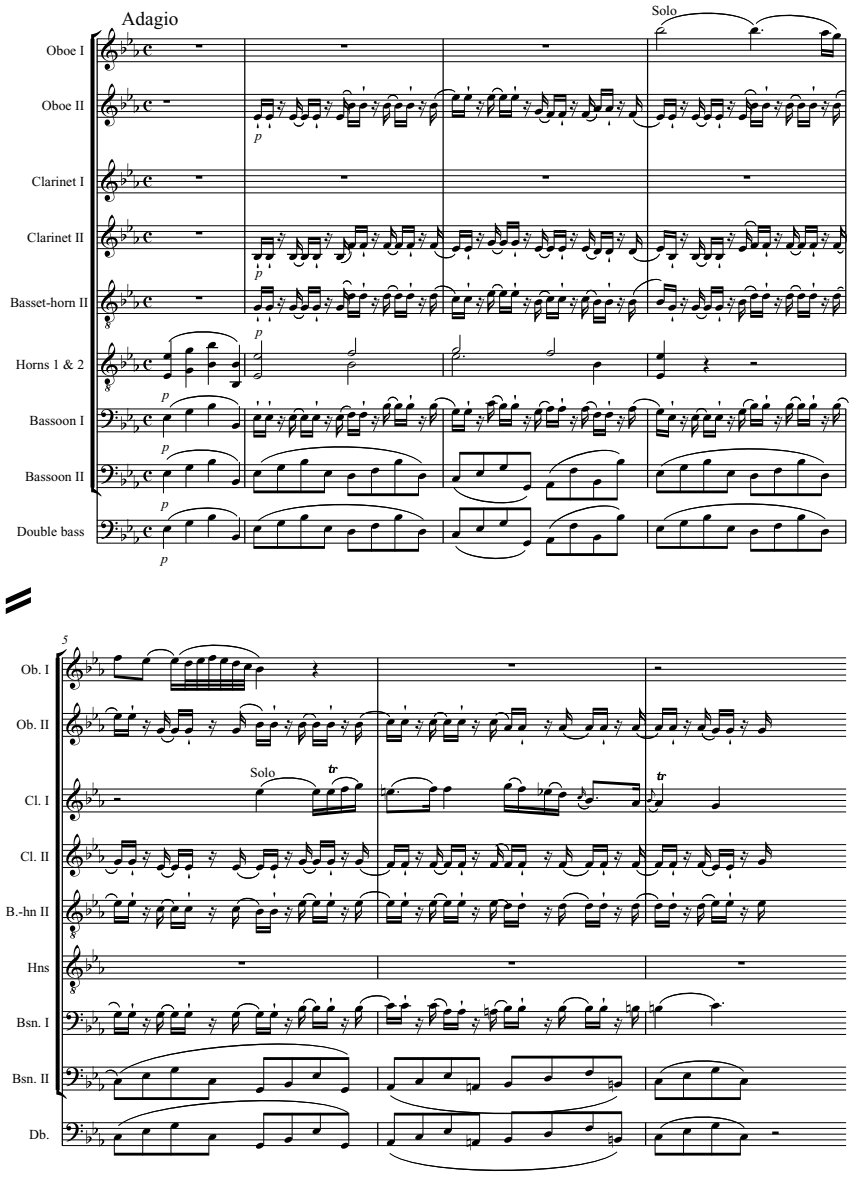
CLIFF EISEN

> SALIERI: . . . the concert began. I heard it through the door – some serenade – at first only vaguely . . . but presently the sound insisted – a solemn Adagio in E flat. It started simply enough: just a pulse in the lowest registers – bassoons and basset horns – like a rusty squeezebox. It would have been comic except for the slowness, which gave it instead a sort of serenity. And then suddenly, high above it, sounded a single note on the oboe. It hung there unwavering, piercing me through, till breath could hold it no longer, and a clarinet withdrew it out of me, and sweetened it into a phrase of such delight it had me trembling. The light flickered in the room. My eyes clouded! The squeezebox groaned louder, and over it the higher instruments wailed and warbled, throwing lines of sound around me – long lines of pain around and through me. Ah, the pain! Pain as I had never known it. I called up my sharp old God, '*What is this? . . . What?!*' But the squeezebox went on and on, and the pain cut deeper into my shaking head, until suddenly I was running, dashing through the side door, stumbling downstairs into the street, into the cold night, gasping for life.[1]

Salieri's description of Mozart's Serenade for Winds in B flat major, K. 361 (example 8.1), does the work – as well as some commonly held beliefs concerning both Mozart and chamber music – surprising justice on a number of counts: it describes a sophisticated interplay of instruments (oboe and clarinet), an enveloping intimacy of expression ('around and through me') and a self-conscious manipulation of artifice and affect ('it would have been comic except for the slowness, which gave it instead a sort of serenity'). But is the serenade, composed for thirteen wind instruments with double bass and performed publicly at the Burgtheater on 23 March 1784, a piece of chamber music?

Today, 'chamber music' is understood to mean intimate, carefully crafted music for a small instrumental ensemble played one to a part and intended either for private performance or for performance in a small hall. The serenade therefore appears to be a different kind of work. For Mozart and Salieri, however, it was unquestionably chamber music. During the eighteenth century, the term – found in theoretical writings by Brossard, Mattheson, Rousseau and Koch[2] – was used to distinguish both a broad stylistic category and a normal venue, one among three: church, theatre and chamber. It included not only instrumental music for small, one-to-a-part ensembles, such as trios with or without keyboard, quartets or quintets, but also

Example 8.1 Mozart, Serenade for Winds in B flat major, K. 361/iii, bars 1–7



symphonies, concertos, works for one instrument, cantatas and songs.[3] This definition applied well into the nineteenth century and while it did not imply purity of style – eighteenth-century church music was frequently described as operatic (sometimes even borrowing traditional opera seria forms such as the da capo aria), theatrical music regularly took over gestures from church music (for example the trombones in the graveyard scene in *Don Giovanni*) and chamber music, especially symphonies, frequently approximated

the theatrical style – the general boundaries were nevertheless clear enough.

It was not until the mid- and late nineteenth century that 'chamber music' took on its modern meaning, and even then the definitions proposed were retrospective, based largely on the prestige of Haydn's, Mozart's and Beethoven's quartets (as well as other similar works by these canonic composers, including string quintets and piano trios) rather than eighteenth-century practice. This meaning dictated an understanding not only of substance and style – intimate, complex and highbrow – but also of scoring, the number and order of movements, and superficial generic characteristics. Works not fitting the 'historical' description were dismissed as precursors, as light music lacking depth and compositional sophistication, intended solely for entertainment and diversion, not for serious contemplation,[4] or, in the case of non-standard scorings, as experimental, reactionary or outside the 'main stream'.

This profoundly evolutionary view of chamber music has little to do with the realities of the eighteenth century and the immense variety of chamber music traditions practised across Europe. For Mozart, these traditions were overwhelmingly the predominant context for his music. What is more, his compositional choices reflect not only time and place but also a personal aesthetic that grew and changed over the course of his life.

Early chamber music to 1780

Documentary evidence for the performance of chamber music in Salzburg notwithstanding – Mozart himself occasionally mentions performances at court – it appears that one-to-a-part ensemble music was not widely cultivated in the archdiocese during the 1760s or 1770s. And local taste, at least insofar as scoring is concerned, was less up to date than elsewhere in Europe. There is no evidence for the composition of string quartets in Salzburg before the mid-1770s[5] and virtually no chamber music with keyboard. Instead, it was trios for two violins and basso or divertimenti for string quartet and two horns that were common. Mozart's divertimenti K. 247 (1776), K. 287 (1777) and K. 334 (1779–80), belong to this tradition. They are leisurely works in six movements, often with introductory marches, and probably intended for specific occasions: K. 247, for example, was composed to celebrate the name day of Countess Antonia Lodron.[6] And he composed only one string trio in Salzburg, K. 266 (1777). On the whole, chamber music in the archdiocese was a conservative affair, although more exotic scorings can sometimes be found: during the 1750s, Leopold Mozart composed divertimenti for violin, cello and double bass and for two cellos and double bass,

while Wolfgang, in the mid-1770s, composed divertimenti for two horns, bassoon and strings (K. 205) and oboe, two horns and strings (K. 251).[7]

Mozart's works for strings only, as well as his accompanied sonatas, accordingly derive from his travels. These include two sets of string quartets (K. 155–60, Milan 1772–3, and K. 168–73, Vienna 1773),[8] two flute quartets (K. 285 and 285a, Mannheim 1777–8), an oboe quartet (K. 370, Munich 1781) and a set of piano and violin sonatas (K. 301–6, Mannheim and Paris 1777–8).[9] The early Milanese quartets largely conform to Italian traditions: each is in three movements, several have expressive minor-key middle movements (K. 157–9) and there are extended contrapuntal passages (possibly Mozart was showing off for his Italian mentors, Padre Martini and Eugène Ligniville), although on the whole the works are characterized by transparent textures with the bulk of the melodic and harmonic interest situated in the first violin and cello parts. That K. 155–60 are 'Italian' quartets – or, better, that Mozart tailored his chamber music to local audiences – is clear from the Viennese set, K. 168–73, composed barely six months later. These are more serious works, featuring four movements (the prevailing Viennese style) and fully developed fugues (in the finales of K. 168 and K. 173). Until recently, Mozart scholarship pinned Mozart's inspiration on Joseph Haydn's newly composed quartets, Op. 17 and Op. 20, but it is just as likely that he adopted a generalized local style of which Haydn's are perhaps the finest examples.[10] And it is frequently suggested that K. 168–73 were composed to impress the Imperial Court, where Leopold hoped to obtain an appointment for his son.

The accompanied sonatas, on the other hand, probably owe their origin as much to Mozart's performing as to his self-representation as a composer: on the road, they gave him a chance to show off both his compositional and his performing skills in places where works of this sort were highly regarded. It is easy to forget that Mozart was a talented string player, that his first appointment in Salzburg was as a violinist and that he continued to play regularly, at least until his move to Vienna in 1781. A report from Salzburg, dated 16 October 1769, describes a private concert at which 'the daughter [Nannerl] first played the keyboard, then Wolfgangus, a youth aged thirteen, sang and played the violin and the keyboard to everyone's astonishment',[11] and his earliest independent concerto was not for keyboard but for violin (K. 207, 1773).[12] In late 1777 Mozart wrote to his father:

> The day before yesterday . . . we had a little concert here . . . I played my [keyboard] concertos in C, B-flat and E-flat, and after that my trio [K. 254] . . . As a finale I played my last *Cassation* in B-flat [K. 287]. They all opened their eyes! I played as though I were the finest fiddler in all Europe.[13]

Leopold wrote back:

> I am not surprised that when you played your last *Cassation* they all opened their eyes. You yourself do not know how well you play the violin, if you will only do yourself credit and play with energy, with your whole heart and mind, yes, just as if you were the first violinist in Europe.[14]

The sonatas that Mozart wrote at Mannheim are traditionally thought to have been influenced by Joseph Schuster,[15] although at least one sonata, K. 301, began life as a work for flute. Throughout the set, Schuster's influence is not too distant: the first movement of K. 303, for example, in which an Adagio introduction represents the 'first' subject and appears again at the recapitulation, seems to be modelled on the Dresden composer's sonatas. And five of the sonatas are in two movements. Nevertheless, it is the expressive Mannheim style that dominates: frequent turns to the minor, jarring dissonances and harmonic and rhythmic disjunctions betray a sensibility close to that of north German music, a sensibility best represented in C. P. E. Bach's works. This is particularly true of the E minor Sonata, K. 304, with its stark unison opening in the first movement, abrupt shift to G major that never fully dispels the darkness of the minor, canonic, bitingly dissonant development and surprisingly reharmonized recapitulation. At the same time, it is worth noting that K. 304 was not composed at Mannheim but at Paris; consequently it has to reckon with works such as the A minor Piano Sonata, K. 310, as well. So does K. 305, also composed in the French capital, even if it is an entirely different kind of composition. One of the most genial of the sonatas composed about this time, it includes two movements: an introductory Allegro di molto and a theme and variations Andante grazioso. The 6/8 metre and triadic motives of the Allegro conjure up a bucolic pastoral-hunting atmosphere even if the chase seems to go on longer than expected: fully half of the first part of the movement is given to cadential gestures and pedal points of increasing agitation (perhaps the prey is more elusive than we are at first led to believe). The variations, on the other hand, are typically Mannheim, not least in the ornamental opening to the second variation and the *ad libitum* adagio of the fourth. Still, the hunt is never far away and the triple-time allegro variation that concludes the set re-inscribes the pastoral mood of the sonata's first movement.

Vienna 1781–1788

In Vienna, where he took up permanent residence in the spring of 1781, Mozart discovered a different chamber music culture: both his professional circumstances and the ways in which chamber music was cultivated locally gave rise to new and different opportunities for the composer. Mozart was

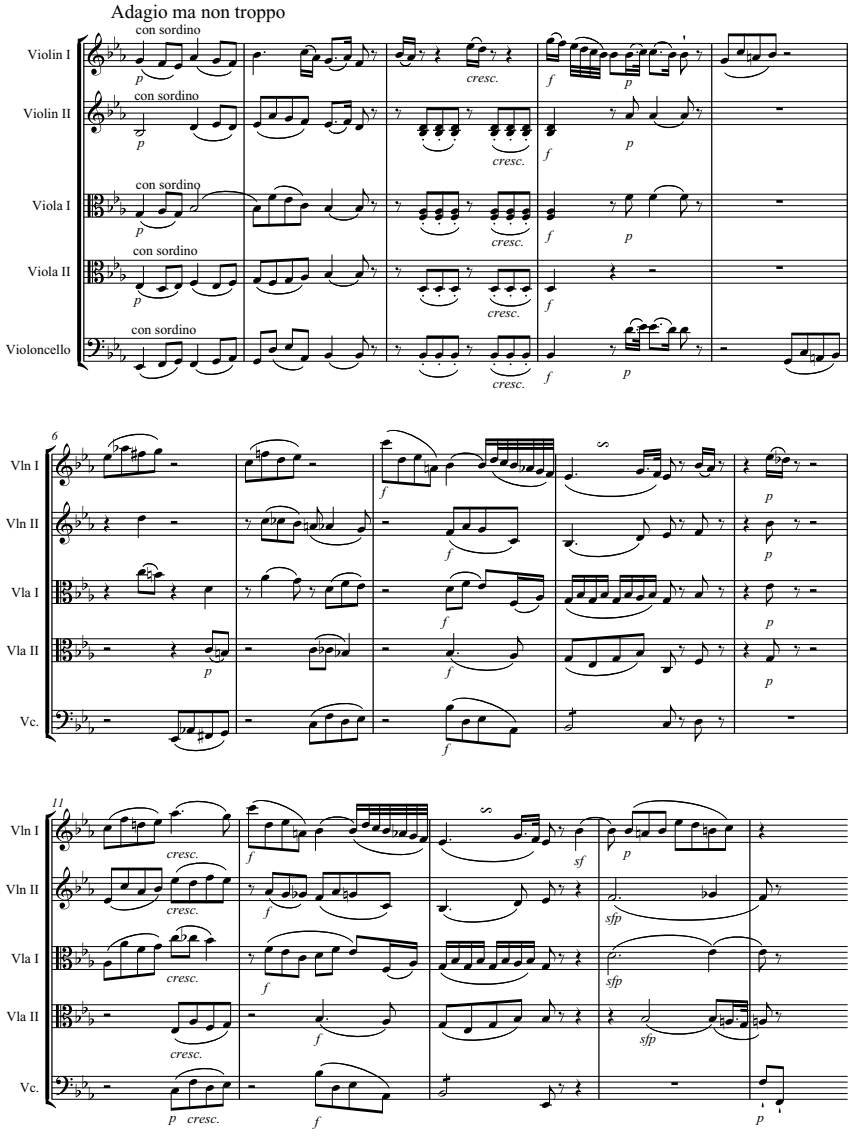
not associated with the court, where chamber music was frequently performed, nor did it figure in public concerts. But it was widely pursued at the homes of the nobility (among them Baron van Swieten, who had Mozart arrange for string quartet several of J. S. Bach's fugues, for which Mozart also composed new preludes) and by the public at large: the bulk of music printed and sold in Vienna during the 1780s was solo keyboard and chamber music. A composer's first calling card was usually a set of accompanied sonatas and Mozart was no exception: K. 296 and K. 376–80 were published by Artaria in December 1781. The sonatas were an immediate success. According to a review from April 1783 published in Carl Friedrich Cramer's widely read and influential *Magazin der Musik*:

> These sonatas are unique of their kind. Rich in new ideas and traces of their author's great musical genius. Very brilliant and suited to the instrument. At the same time, the violin accompaniment is so ingeniously combined with the keyboard part that both instruments are constantly kept in equal prominence; so that these sonatas call for as skilled a violinist as a keyboard player.[16]

In some respects the sonatas recall the music composed just before Mozart's move to Vienna – there are traces here of *Idomeneo* and the earlier accompanied sonatas, K. 301–6. But on the whole they look ahead to the leaner textural style of the period up to 1784 and in particular the piano concertos K. 413–15. (It is worth remarking here that the 'chamber style' as we think of it was still not a fixed idea: when Mozart advertised the three piano concertos, he stated that they could be performed '*a quattro* . . . with 2 violins, 1 viola and violoncello', that is, as piano quintets.)[17] The works are full of surprises: K. 378 includes a sonata movement with three themes and a rondeau finale with a surprising second episode, in the main key but a different metre; the elaborate G major Adagio of K. 379 begins like a sonata (including a first half repeat) but then proceeds to a half-cadence that does not lead to a recapitulation but, rather, a stormy Allegro in G minor; and K. 380, perhaps the most brilliant of the set, exploits distant key relations (an E flat major sonata with a G minor middle movement) and includes a development section in the first movement that begins and ends with a new theme.

What is equally striking about the sonatas is their exploitation of texture as a primary engine of affect and the equality of the parts: although nominally keyboard sonatas with violin accompaniment, they require, as Cramer's critic pointed out, 'as skilled a violinist as a keyboard player'. This is even more true of the later sonatas, including K. 454, written for the Mantuan violinist Regina Strinasacchi (and performed at the Kärntnerthortheater on 29 April 1784), K. 481 (December 1785) and K. 526 (August 1787 and arguably the finest of Mozart's accompanied sonatas). Indeed, texture as a

Example 8.2 Mozart, String Quintet in G minor, K. 516/iii, bars 1–15



motivating principle is key not only among the sonatas but in Mozart's chamber music generally. The two string quintets of 1787, K. 515 and K. 516, offer numerous instances where textural interest threatens to overpower both harmony and form, none more telling than the Adagio ma non troppo of the G minor quintet. The variety of textures in the first dozen bars alone is almost overwhelming (see example 8.2): block chords in bars 1–2, melody and accompaniment in bars 3–4 and then, in bars 5–8, a sudden dissolution of the ensemble, mere snatches of material increasingly separated

from each other (the first violin's figure rises, the cello's descends), followed by a reconstitution of the middle as the second violin and the violas enter in succession (bar 6) and a fully voiced but deceptive cadence at bar 9 (which is then repeated but leading to a perfect cadence). As if the textural variety, rests, awkward intervals, disjunctions and isolation of single voices were not enough, bars 13 and 14 dissolve the ensemble into little more than sound itself: the succession of *sforzandi* (followed by *piani*) is completely static, a moment of stillness punctuated only by a succession of exploding mini-supernovas outlining the prevailing harmony. It is a unique moment, even among Mozart's works, profoundly captivating for its sheer beauty and its preoccupation not with harmony or melody or rhythm but merely with sound. Other instances of overwhelming textural interest can be found throughout the chamber music: in works such as the Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, or the Trio for Clarinet, Viola and Piano, K. 498, it is the unique scoring that first commands attention. Even the two piano quartets, K. 478 and 493, are novel in this regard. Texture also serves to articulate form. In the Piano Trio in B flat major, K. 502, exposition, development and recapitulation each represent an increasingly complex dialogue between piano and violin, with the cello fully participatory only after the second theme; this recurrent textural shape is as important to the affect of the work as any formal device.

In a sense, the violin sonatas represent not only a beginning – Mozart's concerted attempt to make a good impression in his new home and a departure from the style of his earlier works – but also an ending, for they are among the last of Mozart's chamber works to be gathered and published as a traditional opus of six. All of the succeeding sonatas, as well as the two piano quartets, the 'Hoffmeister' Quartet, K. 499, the Trio for Clarinet, Viola and Piano, K. 498, the Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, the string quintets and piano trios are one-off compositions, mostly intended for publication by themselves.[18] The one exception is the six quartets composed and revised by Mozart between 1782 and 1785 and published by Artaria that year with a dedication to Haydn. Mozart described the works as 'the fruits of a long and laborious endeavour', a claim apparently borne out by the relatively large number of quartet fragments from this time and by numerous corrections and changes in the autographs.[19] That Mozart sought to emulate Haydn's recent Op. 33 quartets (but not slavishly to imitate them) can hardly be doubted. Like Haydn's, Mozart's quartets are characterized by textures conceived not merely in four-part harmony, but as four-part discourse, with the actual musical ideas linked to a freshly integrated treatment of the medium. Counterpoint in particular takes on a new importance in the quartets. In the first movements of K. 421 and K. 464, each of the principal themes is subjected to imitative treatment. The Andante of K. 428

follows similar procedures, supported by increased chromaticism (characteristic of the quartet as a whole). The coda of the first movement of the 'Hunt' Quartet, K. 458, draws on the latent imitative potential of the movement's main thematic material while the famous introduction to the 'Dissonance' Quartet, K. 465, represents an extreme of both free counterpoint and chromaticism.[20] The finale of K. 387 represents a different use of counterpoint, not so much as a texture in and of itself, but as a structural topic. Here the main, stable thematic material is represented primarily by fugatos, while transitional and cadential material is generally composed in a melody-and-accompaniment *buffa* style. (Elsewhere – most notably in the finale of the piano concerto K. 459 – this procedure is reversed: in K. 459/iii fugato represents transition and instability and is explosively elaborated in the double fugue of the central episode.) The multi-functionality of Mozart's thematic material in general, as suitable for both contrapuntal and melody-and-accompaniment treatment, is already adumbrated in the C minor Fugue for Two Pianos, K. 426, and its later version for strings, K. 546, where a seemingly commonplace Baroque subject erupts at the end of the movement in the previously unimaginable guise of a melody supported by aggressive sawing away in the upper parts.[21] Beyond this, the quartets exhibit a kaleidoscopic array of gestures and topics,[22] of formal types and affects: they are the essence of 'chamber music' as it came to be defined in the nineteenth century. Early critics described them as prime examples, together with those of Haydn and Beethoven, of the 'Classical' quartet, as opposed to the *quatuor concertant* (where the different instruments take the melody in turn) or *quatuor brillant* (dominated by the first violin, with the rest of the ensemble accompanying). According to Koch, they are the finest works of their kind.[23]

Vienna 1789–1791

The major chamber works composed by Mozart during the second half of 1788, the Divertimento in E flat major, K. 563, and the Piano Trio in G major, K. 564, have curious histories. It is surprising, in a way, that Mozart composed them at all: they are the only substantial works of any sort written by him between the 'Jupiter' Symphony of August 1788 and the early summer of 1789 (when he began a set of sonatas and the three 'Prussian' Quartets, a legacy of his trip to Berlin that spring).[24] Nor do they appear to have been composed with a general Viennese audience in mind. The divertimento was written privately for Michael Puchberg (and never published during Mozart's lifetime) while the trio was first published in London by Stephen Storace, one of Mozart's English acquaintances resident in Vienna

during the mid-1780s. (Stephen's sister, Nancy, was the first Susanna in *Figaro*.)

The Clarinet Quintet, K. 581, of September 1789 was written for Anton Stadler and performed by him at the Burgtheater on 22 December. It marks a rare appearance of a chamber work at a Viennese theatre (although Mozart had set a precedent with his performance of the Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, also at the Burgtheater, on 1 April 1784) and is in many ways a late manifestation of the public 'Classical' style of the mid-1780s, a welding together of diverse gestures over the course of entire paragraphs and entire movements. At the arrival on the dominant in the first movement, for example, a rest in all the parts – more a signal to stop the action after a tutti arrival than an indication of any particular length of silence – is followed by a pizzicato cello line outlining the tonic and fifth of the harmony, long-held notes in the second violin and viola that seem almost to emerge from the preceding silence, and a new lyrical melody in the first violin. The re-entry of the clarinet with the same melody signals further changes: a shift to the minor mode, quieter dynamics and syncopations in the strings. All of these lead to a confrontation between the clarinet and the rest of the ensemble, an outbreak of semiquavers and a conclusive trill, on three instruments, resulting in the firmest cadence in the movement to that point. The effect is to drag the listener along on a wave of increasingly agitated activity.

Yet the Clarinet Quintet is not generally representative of Mozart's prevailing style at the time, which is often characterized as ironic, restrained or serenely detached. Some writers trace the origin of this style to the last three symphonies, others to *Don Giovanni* – whatever its origin, it is pervasive only among the so-called 'late' works. And frequently it provides grounds for dismissal, especially by comparison with the chamber music of the mid-1780s. Hans Keller described the last string quintet, K. 614, as 'a bad arrangement of a wind piece in mock-Haydn style', and adding insult to injury he comments: 'Mozart entered it in his diary on 12 April [1791], and the writing looks somewhat shaky to me; perhaps he was ill.'[25] This may be facetious but in fact Keller appeals to a long tradition of excusing Mozart's late works on grounds of ill-health, depression, financial anxiety or the necessity to compose on demand, whether string quartets for the King of Prussia or on a subject suggested to him by Emperor Joseph II for *Così fan tutte* (a theory now long discredited). Eric Blom, for instance, describes the 'Prussian' Quartets in this way: 'the wonder is that they come so near to Mozart's high-water mark in quartet writing, for all that they were written under the constraint of poverty as well as that of a royal mandate'.[26] And it is not only the twentieth century that condemns these works – the nineteenth century did as well. Blom's precursor is Jahn, writing in 1856: 'These quartets completely maintain Mozart's reputation for inventive powers, sense of

proportion and mastery of form, but they lack that absolute devotion to the highest ideal of art characteristic of the earlier ones.'[27]

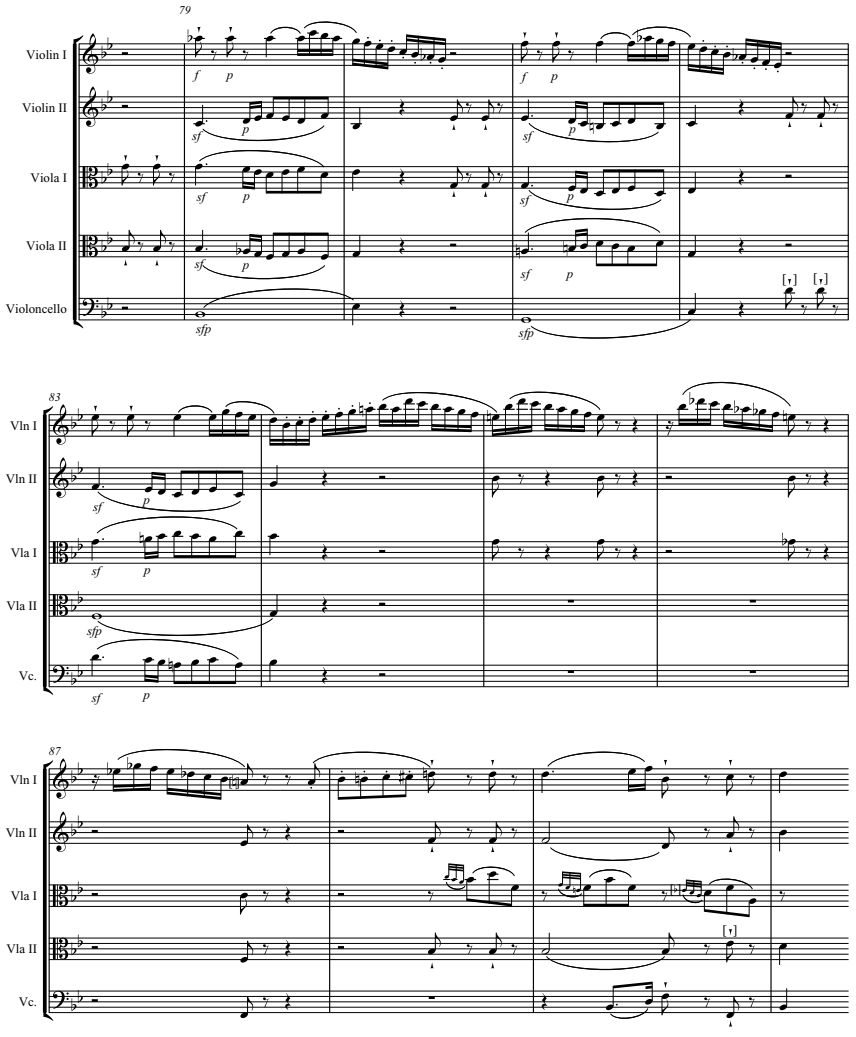
If the late quartets and quintets are condemned in particular, it is chiefly because they do not correspond to the 'Classical' ideal promoted about 1850 on the basis of the six quartets dedicated to Haydn and the quintets K. 515 and 516 of 1787 – in this sense, they are rejected on broad, biographical grounds and because of the unfulfilled expectation (or perhaps the unfulfilled desire) that they correspond to what was then (and still is) accepted as 'the' Classical style. But there was no such expectation at the time the works were written, nor were the works received as such. An obituary notice published in Frankfurt less than two weeks after Mozart's death noted: 'A few weeks before his death he composed another 4 [*sic*] *Quadros* in which he nearly surpassed even himself in art, modulation and intensity of expression.'[28] And when Artaria published the 'Prussian' Quartets in December 1791, they advertised them as 'Classical' chamber music, fully worthy of Mozart:

> These quartets are one of the most estimable works of the composer *Mozart* . . . they flowed from the pen of this so great musical genius not long before his death, and they display all that musical interest in respect of art, beauty and taste which must awaken pleasure and admiration not only in the amateur, but in the true connoisseur also.[29]

What later critics perceived as a new and often unsuccessful 'late' style, then, was not an issue for Mozart's audiences, even though the style of the works is clearly 'different'. The String Quintet in D major, K. 593, for example, has a first movement in a style more spare in texture than that of the preceding quintets but polyphonically richer, especially in the recapitulation where the exposition material is extended and elaborated. The same can be said of K. 614, the minuet of which is canonic while in the finale the development section includes a double fugue. At the same time, both quintets self-consciously exploit similar topics – each first-movement Allegro begins with a passage imitating horns – while making use of textures in novel ways. The Adagio of K. 593 is a study in sonorities: each of its five large paragraphs is similarly structured around a recurring pattern, beginning with the full ensemble, reducing to three parts (the violins and first viola alternating with the violas and cello) and then returning to five. K. 614 is novel in a different way. Here the first movement can be read as a contest between the first violin and the rest of the ensemble, each vying with the other not only to assert superiority but also to control and direct the musical discourse, achieving rapprochement only in the final bars.

The notion of a contest in the first movement of K. 614 suggests that play on genre, consisting in this case of tension between the 'brilliant' and

Example 8.3 Mozart, String Quintet in E flat major, K. 614/ii, bars 79–90



'Classical' styles identified by early writers on string chamber music, is self-consciously present in Mozart's works of the late 1780s. Generic play is hardly foreign to Mozart's earlier style: the Quintet for Piano and Winds is a concerto in all but name, the slow movement of the Horn Quintet, K. 407, of 1782, is also based on the model of the concerto, and the Piano Sonata in B flat major, K. 333, includes a cadenza. But in the case of K. 614 there is a twist: Mozart manipulates not merely markers of genre but markers of form and procedure as well. The slow movement of K. 614, ostensibly a theme and variations (and among the most popular of Mozart's late variation sets as several contemporaneous arrangements for keyboard show), takes over characteristic gestures not only of the rondo, including tonic restatements of

the main theme, but of sonata as well. The passages linking the variations are typical sonata transitions while the climax of the movement, which includes some of the sharpest dissonances in all Mozart, corresponds to the increase in harmonic tension characteristic of a sonata development (see, for instance, example 8.3). A clear return to both tonic and main theme characterizes the final variation (bars 88ff.), which is followed by a sonata-like coda, drawing together the main procedural gestures of the movement.

The same pervasive exploitation of underlying topics characterizes the 'Prussian' Quartets as well. K. 575 gives a hint right off the bat: three of its four movements are titled Allegretto and two of them begin *sotto voce*. In both the first and final movements, a characteristic motive is elaborated, expanded, exploited and fractured but eventually given a majestic statement towards the end. K. 590, on the other hand, is a study in asymmetries, often of an unusual sort: the first movement development is made up almost exclusively of accompanimental gestures, with hardly a tune in sight.[30] The slow movement is not unlike that of K. 614: an almost obsessive set of variations, it masks a sonata structure that eventually gives rise to a coda of stunning beauty.

The essence of the 'late' style, then, is a return to an earlier aesthetic, one of unity of affect. It is not a return to an earlier style, a style characterized by uniformity of surface: for Mozart, the surface remains as varied as ever, sometimes more varied, more disjunctive. But underneath there is a uniformity of idea or topic that motivates and is expressed by the music. In this respect, the later chamber music is strikingly different from the chamber music of the mid-1780s, where variation, change, disruption and disjunction, even at the level of the whole, is paramount. This newly conceived and executed unity of affect is not just a feature of the chamber music, however: it informs the Requiem, *Die Zauberflöte, La clemenza di Tito* and the last concertos as well. It is, in fact, a new style, and, absenting biographical tropes as well as the unrealistic wish that the composer's style remain constant, the later chamber music shares with other works of 1789–91 in a regenerated exploration of music's affective power.