

## String Quartet in C major, K. 465, “Dissonant”

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg  
Died December 5, 1791, Vienna

When Mozart arrived in Vienna, the towering figure in music was Franz Joseph Haydn, then nearly 50. Haydn had taken the string quartet, which for the previous generation had been merely a divertimento-like entertainment in the *style galant*, and transformed it. He liberated the viola and cello from what had been purely accompanying roles and made all four voices equal partners; he further made each detail of rhythm and theme and harmony an important part of the musical enterprise. Under Haydn’s inspired hands, the string quartet evolved from entertainment music into an important art form. Mozart, who was 25 when he arrived in Vienna, quickly grasped what the older master had achieved with the string quartet and embarked on a cycle of six quartets of his own. These are in no sense derivative works — they are thoroughly original quartets, each of them a masterpiece — but Mozart acknowledged his debt (and admiration) by dedicating the entire cycle to Haydn when it was published in 1785.

The “*Dissonant*” *Quartet*, the last of the six, was completed on January 14, 1785. The nickname comes from its extraordinary slow introduction: the quartet is in C major and the music opens with a steady pulse of C’s from the cello, but as the other three voices make terraced entrances above, their notes (A-flat, E-flat, and A — all wrong for the key of C major) grind quietly against each other. The tonality remains uncertain until the *Allegro*, where the music settles into radiant C major and normal sonata form. Mozart specifically appends the marking *cantabile* (one of the few times he used that term) to the lyric *Andante*; here the simple melody develops by repetition, growing more complex as it evolves. The third movement, in minuet-and-trio form, brings further surprises: the minuet sends the first violin soaring across its entire range, while the dramatic trio section moves unexpectedly into C minor. After these stresses, the concluding *Allegro* returns to the sunlight of the opening movement, flowing along easily on its opening theme and effortlessly changing keys.

Mozart may have been struck by Haydn’s quartets, but now it was Haydn’s turn to be amazed. When he heard the “*Dissonant*” *Quartet* and two others of this cycle performed at a garden party in Vienna in February 1785, Haydn pulled Mozart’s father

Leopold aside and offered as sincere a compliment as any composer ever gave another: “Before God and as an honest man I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste and, what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition.”

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## String Quartet No. 3 “Leaves of an unwritten diary”

Krzysztof Penderecki

Born November 23, 1933, Dębica, Poland

Died March 29, 2020, Kraków, Poland

Krzysztof Penderecki's *Third String Quartet* came into being because of two happy events. In 2008 the Shanghai String Quartet celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and Penderecki celebrated his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. To mark those occasions, two presenting organizations – Peak Performances of Montclair University in New Jersey and The Modlin Center for the Arts of the University of Richmond in Virginia – commissioned a string quartet from Penderecki. The Shanghai Quartet gave the premiere in Warsaw in November 2008 during the celebrations that marked the composer's birthday.

Penderecki was present at that premiere, and – speaking to the audience – he noted that this music is quite personal for him: he described the act of composing it as “a sentimental journey” and pointed out that the quartet has a subtitle: “Leaves of an Unwritten Diary.” But it would be a mistake to think that this is program music, a piece that “tells the story” of Penderecki's life. Instead, Penderecki incorporates bits of music that were important to him at various moments in his life, and from them he fashions a one-movement string quartet that spans about eighteen minutes.

The *Third Quartet* is built on ideas that return in various forms throughout, and the first of these is announced at the very beginning. This opening section, marked *Grave*, features a long, chromatic solo for the viola. There is something grieving, keening, about this extended slow melody, and eventually it rises quite high in the viola's register. Suddenly the tempo leaps ahead (such quick changes of tempo and mood are very much a part of this music), as the viola stamps out the interval of a minor third – that interval, too, will recur throughout. Next comes a section marked *Tempo di valse*, and Penderecki stresses that it should be played *poco rubato e sentimentale*. As this waltz proceeds, the first violin gradually takes up the viola melody from the very beginning. Here – and throughout the quartet – Penderecki will often bring the music to a complete stop, and there will be moments of absolute silence before it resumes. Along the way, Penderecki quotes an old gypsy tune that his father, a violinist, introduced him to when he was a boy. The quartet eventually arrives at a subdued, chorale-like passage, presses on to a strident climax, and finally fades into silence.

It should be noted that Penderecki's *Third String Quartet* poses extraordinary challenges for its performers. Penderecki assumes that he has four virtuoso players, then creates passages of unbelievable rhythmic and intonational complexity for them – there are moments throughout the quartet when individual players are given brief cadenzas. Penderecki also has a keen ear for instrumental sonority, creating passages played entirely in harmonics or with the slithering sound of ponticello bowing.

Did Penderecki, on the occasion of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, use that occasion to look back and tell the story of his life, as Bedrich Smetana did in his *First String Quartet* (which is significantly subtitled “From My Life”)? No. Instead, Penderecki took these “Leaves of an unwritten dairy,” musical ideas that had deep significance for him, and used them to create a powerful and abstract piece of music.

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