

NOTES ON QUINTET FOR CLARINET AND STRINGS IN A, K. 581,
BY WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

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Mozart's Quintet for Clarinet and Strings in A, K. 581, was completed on September 29, 1789. It was composed for Anton Stadler (1753-1812), who had been among Mozart's closest friends for several years. He was one of the leading clarinetists of that time, famous in Prague and Vienna, where he had been a member of the Imperial Court Orchestra since 1787. Both were freemasons and played together at their meetings. Stadler seems to have been a rather unstable character, however, and took advantage of financial help which Mozart gave him although he could ill afford it. Yet, so ardent was his friendship that he wrote for Stadler not only this Quintet but also, later, the beautiful Concerto, K. 622, which was drafted originally for basset-horn, on which Stadler also excelled.¹

Mozart participated in the first public performance of the Quintet on December 22, 1789, at a concert given by the Society of Musicians as a benefit for its widows and orphans. In the following April he also played in a private performance for some of his friends.²

The combination of wind and string instruments in chamber music was not new. Dozens of trio sonatas for flute and violin had been written; Mozart's own quartets used flute and oboe.³

¹A. Hyatt King, Mozart Chamber Music (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1968), p. 63.

²Ibid.

³Louis L. Biancolli, The Mozart Handbook (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1954), p. 506.

Mozart first heard the clarinet in London when he was eight and was enchanted by it. As his art matured he used it whenever possible in his orchestral works and operas. But he had only introduced it twice into chamber music: in the Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, and in the Trio for Clarinet, Viola, and Piano, K. 498. In this Trio, where the clarinet matched so well with the dark tones of the viola, he must have realized that the quality of the clarinet was such that it had distinctive possibilities in combination with stringed instruments alone.

"In the Oboe Quartet and the flute quartets, the cool, penetrating quality of the wind instrument had given Mozart little option but to write music conceived partly in concertante style. But the greater range of the clarinet and, especially, the expressive warmth of its middle register made it almost ideal for both blending and contrasting with string tone."⁴

Thus, what is new in the K. 581 is the manner in which Mozart combined the five instruments. "Mozart was faced with the possibilities of treating the clarinet as a solo instrument, thus writing non-chamber music, or of ignoring its special characteristics and treating it as just another voice in a five-voice texture, thus writing dull chamber music."⁵ He made neither mistake, but produced a texture in which the solo characteristics of the wind instrument were projected beautifully, yet in which perfect balance of the five instruments is achieved. In the first movement, the first violin and clarinet alternate

⁴King, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

⁵Biancolli, loc. cit.