



**Aeolus Quartet with
Nermis Mieses, oboe
Adam Unsworth, horn
Dana Kelley, viola**

November 9, 10 & 11, 2023

PROGRAM NOTES

Support for the program notes is generously provided by Roberta Viviano.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

(SALZBURG, 1756 –VIENNA, 1791)

Quartet for Oboe and Strings, K. 370 (1781)

W.A. Mozart travelled to Munich, Germany for six weeks in 1781 to stage the premiere of *Idomeneo*, his first mature opera. He composed the oboe quartet in response to his reacquaintance with Friedrich Ramm, an oboist the composer had first met while residing in Mannheim in 1777. The court orchestra of the Elector of Palatine in Mannheim was one of the finest in all of Europe, and Mozart composed works for several of its woodwind players, including Ramm, who served as principal oboist of the Mannheim ensemble and then became a member of the electoral orchestra in Munich. In the opening bars of this quartet Mozart introduces the oboe as a graceful and delicate instrument, but the virtuosic demands quickly escalate as the oboist must perform difficult passagework and impressive leaps that soar up to the high register. In the brief slow movement, the oboe enters sustaining a high A

for seven beats to display the instrument's resplendent tone. The movement proceeds as an exhibition of the oboe's range, featuring its highest and lowest registers, and unique coloration. The concluding rondo is a playful dance in 6/8 meter. About halfway through the movement, Mozart presents another surprising challenge as the music becomes polymetric and the oboe shifts to a 4/4 meter, countering the 6/8 meter in the accompaniment.

Quintet for Horn and Strings, K. 407 (1782)

After the success of *Idomeneo*, Mozart left his position as third concertmaster at Archbishop Colloredo's court in Salzburg and settled in Vienna, hoping to become famous in the imperial city. Ignaz Leutgeb, a horn player who was Mozart's friend and colleague in Salzburg, had moved to Vienna in 1777 and borrowed money from Mozart's father, Leopold, to buy a small home. This is the first work that Mozart composed for Leutgeb; shortly thereafter, he dedicated three horn concertos to Leutgeb. In letters and score annotations, Mozart often made fun of his friend for being dimwitted and playing out of tune, but Leutgeb must have been an excellent horn player because he succeeded at performing Mozart's compositions on the natural (valveless) horn. Pitches outside of the instrument's harmonic series could only be produced by varying lip pressure or placing a cupped hand into the horn bell (hand stopping).

In this quintet, Mozart matches the accompanying string quartet, which is comprised of two violas, instead of two violins, to the horn's range. In the opening sonata form, Mozart emphasizes the horn's strengths – playing triadic fanfares and broad melodies – while also illustrating that the instrument is capable of executing Italianate filigree, which is much easier to perform on string or keyboard instruments. The slow movement's 3/8 meter suggests a pastoral scene with the dialogue between horn and first violin evoking shepherds calling back and forth to each other in the countryside, anticipating the conversation between English horn and offstage oboe heard in the opening of the third movement of

Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. The jovial rondo finale has to sound like effortless fun, but this is no easy feat for the horn as Mozart favors sixteenth-note runs and exposed chromatic lines, a humorous prank that both friends probably enjoyed.

Quintet No. 2 for Strings, K. 516 (1787)

In 1787, during an unhappy time in his life, Mozart composed two phenomenal string quintets. Mozart was unsettled by his inability to earn recognition and a permanent salaried position in Vienna, and distraught over his father's illness, which led to his death. The quintet begins with an overriding sense of melancholy and angst, as piercing chromatic alterations further fracture the already tragic key of G minor. In the opening sonata form movement, instead of moving to the key of B-flat major for the second theme, Mozart postpones modulation to a major key area until the closing theme. The development section launches into a stunning contrapuntal expansion of the second theme, which fixates on an ascending minor sixth. The recapitulation and coda sections dwell on darker harmonies and timbres.

The second movement, further intensifying the turbulent mood, begins with a distorted minuet, as the opening measures are characterized by three aggressive diminished seventh chords. In the outer framing sections of the movement, denoted minuet, Mozart eschews the pleasant conventions typically associated with the courtly dance. His hesitant acknowledgement of courtly decorum in the trio section is clouded by descending melodic contours and wistful sighs, perhaps conveying that these trivial luxuries are distant from the realities of the present (the minuet). The Adagio is, interestingly, a sonata form without development, meaning that Mozart devises a first, second and closing theme, and then repeats them all. The contrasting themes in this movement are particularly captivating as the Adagio begins with a brief hymn with muted strings in the key of Eb major. This is the type of melody that listeners would expect to dominate a slow movement, but it only lasts four measures. Then, Mozart thins the texture to present a hollow echoing duet between the first violin and cello.

Increasing somberness and dissonance follows, until suddenly our spirits are lifted by a lighthearted ditty that is accompanied by a bouncy, walking bassline. On top of being exquisitely crafted, this quintet is endlessly fascinating because Mozart explores such a wide emotional spectrum. The finale begins with a slow introduction in G minor, another grief-ridden statement – often compared to an operatic lament – and then bursts into G major for the Allegro. Although Mozart toyed with the idea of composing the entire finale in G minor, he ultimately settled on concluding the quintet with an energetic rondo form, but brilliantly unified the work by transporting the anguished motives that have recurred throughout the piece, such as the slurred sighing half steps and descending scalar lines, into an uplifting context.

Program notes by Jessica Payette, Associate Professor of Music at Oakland University.