

The BobCasts



Episode 4

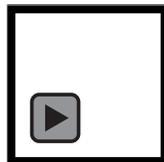
Mozart's "Prussian" String Quartets

Welcome everyone. I'm Bob Greenberg, Music Historian-in-Residence for San Francisco Performances, and the title of this BobCast is *Mozart's "Prussian" String Quartets*.

San Francisco Performances will feature concerts by four superb string quartets this season: the Danish String Quartet, the Doric String Quartet, the Modigliani Quartet, and the Chiaroscuro Quartet. Bless them all, each of their concerts will feature a string quartet by Wolfgang Mozart. Between them, the Doric and Chiaroscuro quartets will play two of Mozart's last three string quartets, which are collectively known as the "Prussian String Quartets".

Well then! We've got a topic! Mozart's "Prussian" Quartets.

Let's hear a little music in order to put in us the proper frame of mind: the opening of the first of Mozart's Prussian Quartets, in D major, K. 575 of 1789, which will be performed by the Chiaroscuro on May 1, 2021 at Herbst Theater:



Mozart, D Major String Quartet, K. 575, movement 1

From the sublime to the ridiculous: Wolfgang Mozart and money.

Too bad about Mozart and money. You'd think that as a freelance musician he would have figured it out: make a buck, spend 95 cents, and put a nickel away for the inevitable rainy day. Like most self-employed people doing contract work, Mozart made his money in lumps; a few great months (and Mozart did indeed have some substantial pay days) would inevitably be followed by a dry month or two. But Mozart did not protect himself against the dry times; and if his income was variable, well, his expenses were constant.

Mozart's childhood was partly to blame for his profligate spending. From the youngest age, he was celebrated and petted by many of the wealthiest people in Europe. From the youngest age, his economic worldview was shaped by the wealth of his patrons and the opulence of the opera houses he so adored. As a young adult, he did not perceive himself as merely a "musi-

cian”—but rather, as someone whose talents and work ethic imbued him with his own “nobility”. He felt that his home, his furniture, his carriage, his food and wine, his clothes, his wigs, and a hundred other such things should be as good as those owned and enjoyed by the rich people he grew up entertaining; “I deserve no less!” was his absolute, if unspoken, belief. Unfortunately, unlike the nobility, with their estates and investments producing a steady stream of income, Mozart actually had to work for a living. And as much as he earned, it was never quite enough, and the precarious financial balancing act that he managed to maintain for his first seven years in Vienna began to crumble in 1788 and go into free-fall in 1789.

Robert L. Marshall writes:

“Whether Mozart was merely the victim of financial ineptitude, bad luck stemming from unsuccessful investments, the expenses associated with his wife’s medical needs, or whether there was perhaps a more sinister cause of his financial worries—such as an addiction to gambling—will probably never be known for certain.”

Here’s what we do know. In 1786, despite the initial success of the opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart earned 30% less than he had in 1784. By 1788, the 32-year-old Mozart’s income had fallen an additional 35% to its lowest level since 1781, the year he moved to Vienna.

There are a number of reasons for this falloff of Mozart’s income. Difficult though it is for us to believe, here, today, by 1788 Mozart’s popularity in Vienna was on the wane: commissions, performance opportunities, and publications were simply not coming in as they once had. The political situation in Vienna was also partly to blame: between 1788-1791 Austria was engaged in a costly and unpopular war with the Ottoman Turks. Strict austerity measures were imposed in Vienna, including, at various points in time, closing the theaters. We would observe the obvious: it’s going to be difficult for musicians to make a living when theaters and concert halls are closed!

Mozart and his wife Constanze tried to cope; they cut costs here and there. But by 1788 it was too little too late—they’d lived too high on credit for too long—and their financial bubble burst. Wolfgang and Constanze could not believe what was happening to them; they were convinced they were just having a run of bad luck. So rather than truly economize, they begged and borrowed even more. As an example of such begging we have, among other such documents, 21 letters that Mozart sent to his friend and Masonic brother, a businessman named Michael Puchberg. The letters to Puchberg are, collectively, a pathetic example of a freelance artist in the throes of dire material need. We need only sample one of these letters in order to get a feel for how they read.

Vienna, July 12th, 1789

Dearest, most BELOVED friend and most honorable brother;

GREAT GOD! I would not wish my worst enemy to be in my present position. And if you, most beloved friend and brother, forsake me, we are altogether lost, both my unfortunate and blameless self and my poor sick wife and child...GOOD GOD! I am coming to you not with thanks but with fresh entreaties! Instead of paying my debts I AM ASKING FOR MORE MONEY! Fate is so much against me, though only in Vienna, that even when

I want to, I cannot make any money...So it all depends, my ONLY friend, upon WHETHER YOU WILL OR CAN LEND ME ANOTHER 500 GULDEN...OH GOD—I can hardly bring myself to send this letter—and yet I must...For GOD’S sake, forgive me, only forgive me!—and—Adieu.

*Ever your most grateful servant, true friend and brother,
W. A. Mozart”*

Well, yuck. This is not just asking for help—this is groveling in the dirt. Mozart was a proud man. That he was willing to write such a letter indicates the level of his need. Wolfgang and Constanze pawned various belongings, and then borrowed against the pawn tickets. Like those folks who take out a second mortgage in order to pay off credit cards that are being used to pay the first mortgage, the Mozart’s mountain of debt just continued to grow.

Hello, Berlin

On April 8, 1789—three months before he wrote the just-quoted letter to Michael Puchberg—Mozart left Vienna for what became a two-month journey to Northern Germany, where he hoped to revive his flagging career. The trip marked the first time Mozart had been separated from his wife Constanze since their marriage nearly seven years before.

Now about this “trip”. The goal was Berlin, where Mozart claimed to have been summoned to the Prussian court by none-other-than the music-loving, cello-playing King Friedrich Wilhelm II himself, who was—according to Mozart—“anxious to receive me”. Certainly, Mozart’s wife Constanze believed this to be true. So did Mozart’s many creditors back in Vienna, who assumed he would return with some hard, Prussian cash in his pocket.

But alas, it was all alternative fact (a lie, okay, a lie). Mozart had not been summoned by the King of Prussia, and his “belief” that by simply showing up he would be embraced by the Prussian King and his court was a massive chunk of self-delusion. Here’s the police report sent to the King on Mozart’s arrival:

“Someone named “Motzart” (who at his arrival declared himself to be a Kapellmeister from Vienna) reports that he desires to lay his talents before Your Sovereign Majesty’s feet and hopes that Your Majesty will receive him.”

“Motzart” who? No audience was granted.

Mozart was mortified: he was about to be exposed as the liar he was. So he lied some more: he wrote Constanze and told her that he had played before Queen Frederica Louisa on May 26 (for which he’d been awarded 800 florins) *and* had been commissioned to compose six string quartets for the king *and* six easy piano sonatas for Princess Friederike.

Mozart biographer Maynard Solomon points out that:

“There are no court records, letters, memoirs, newspaper accounts, or documents of any kind to confirm Mozart’s [appearance] at court, the commissioning of two sets of works, or the payment to him of any sum of money.”

In fact, the only extant documentary evidence we have of Mozart's "visit" to Berlin was the police report I read to you a moment ago.

When he got home, Mozart had a lot of *'splainin* to do.

"Wolfgang, where are the 800 florins from the Queen of Prussia?"

"What, did you think the trip was free? That money covered my expenses!"

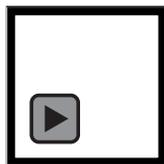
"Wolfgang, where are the contracts for the commissions?"

"Okay, here's how they do things in Berlin: first I have to compose the pieces; then I'll dedicate them to the king and the princess and then they'll pay me, okay?"

Okay: in fact, Mozart never composed a single one of the piano sonatas for Princess Friederike and after composing three of the six projected string quartets, he abandoned that project as well. He sold the quartets outright to the Viennese publisher Artaria and they were published without any dedication whatsoever. They do, however, bear the appellation "Prussian", if for no other reason than it was Mozart's trip to Prussia that prompted their composition.

These were hard times for the Mozart family. And yet Mozart's three Prussian string quartets sparkle with his trademark brilliance and imagination, as if the almost paralyzing issues of his everyday life went completely unnoticed by his compositional muse.

Let's close with the opening of the fourth and final movement of Mozart's *String Quartet in F Major, K. 590*, the third of the Prussian Quartets and the last string quartet Mozart would compose. It will be performed by the Doric String Quartet on January 19, 2021 at Herbst Theater.



Mozart, String Quartet in F Major, K. 590

Thank you.