

**THE SHANGHAI
QUARTET** plays
**MOZART'S
LAST TWO
QUARTETS**

No. 22
in B-Flat
K. 589

No. 23
in F
K. 590

DE 3192



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THE LAST QUARTETS

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

String Quartet No. 23 in F Major, K. 590 [28:42]

- 1 I. Allegro moderato (9:12)
- 2 II. Andante (8:51)
- 3 III. Minuetto; Allegretto: Trio (4:01)
- 4 IV. Allegro (6:38)

String Quartet No. 22 in B-Flat Major, K. 589 [23:07]

- 5 I. Allegro (6:58)
- 6 II. Larghetto (6:23)
- 7 III. Menuetto; Moderato: Trio (6:11)
- 8 IV. Allegro assai (3:35)

SHANGHAI STRING QUARTET

WEIGANG LI, violin

YIWEN JIANG, violin

HONGGANG LI, viola

JAMES WILSON, cello

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 51:49



There is no way to gloss over the fact that Mozart's last two string quartets—the last three, in fact—were composed under such a cloud of financial stress, illness, and domestic worries that their very existence seems something of a miracle. But then, Mozart's life itself is something of a miracle—a number of his most astonishing works were written in dire circumstances, but the music gives no hint of the pain of his surroundings. The Quartets K. 589 and K. 590, for example, were flanked by nothing less than *Così fan tutte* (1790) and *The Magic Flute* (1791).

A great part of the pain in 1789 and 1790 was monetary. Mozart was, in fact, so desperately in need of money that his repeated letters begging for loans from his friend and Masonic brother Michael Puchberg (21 letters in all), are distressing to read:

"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"—thus begins a long epistle of July 14, 1789. And three days later: *"I fear you are angry with me, for you are not sending me a reply!...I entreat you, if it is quite impossible for you to assist me this time with*

such a large sum, to show your friendship and brotherly affection by helping me at once with as much as you can spare." The year 1790 brought no relief, only a further spate of letters to Puchberg. *"Whereas I felt tolerably well yesterday,"* reads a typical one, *"I am absolutely wretched today. I could not sleep all night for pain....At present I am in want! Can you not help me out with a trifle?"*

In the midst of these travails Mozart set out from Vienna to Berlin with Prince Carl Lichnowsky in the spring of 1789 to be presented—so he hoped—to William II, King of Prussia, an avid cellist and sometime patron of both Haydn and Boccherini. Arising from this trip are the three "Prussian" quartets, K.575 and the two quartets performed on this recording. But also arising is a small mystery: it is not at all clear that the King actually commissioned these works, or even received Mozart personally. "I am composing six easy clavier sonatas for Princess Frederike [the King's daughter] and six quartets for the King....The two dedications will bring me in something," the composer confided to Puchberg. But Mozart wrote only one sonata and only three of the proposed six quartets, and when they were published shortly after his death they bore no dedica-

tion. And unfortunately they brought in very little of the anticipated “something,” as Mozart made clear in a letter written when he completed K.490 in June 1790: “I have now been forced to give away my quartets (that exhausting labor) for a mere song, simply in order to have cash in hand to meet my present difficulties.”

Whether or not King William ordered the works, Mozart was careful to do homage when he wrote them—many of the movements give special prominence to the cello and would have shown off the royal talents handsomely.

The first movement of the **B-Flat Quartet K. 589**, for example, has three distinct themes, and the cello introduces two of them. The violin begins, in a tranquil opening of clear and lucid harmony, and soon passes the theme to the cello; the second idea, a rising arpeggio figure, appears in the cello and moves up to the first violin; the third subject, a sinuous running line, is handled in the same manner. It is the cellist, as well, who gets the development section off and running—a section concerning itself almost exclusively with the opening theme.

The King’s chosen instrument starts the slow movement, and is placed at a much higher register than the accompanying

violin—a rather unusual arrangement. After the first violin takes its turn at the subject, a gentle series of descending scales leads into new realms and a new theme; everything is then repeated, before the short coda.

The first violin dominates the Minuet in its own agile style, and takes command of the Trio as well, with the lower instruments providing propulsion. The finale, barreling along in 6/8 time and dancing with energy, does not neglect the cello but does assign it a more customary role as keeper of the bass line. The King, at this point, could have rested on his laurels.

The **Quartet in F, K. 590** opens with a striking rhetorical flourish—one of those highly individual signature figures that makes itself known unmistakably whenever it appears: the abruptly plunging sixteenth notes can’t be missed. This theme, introduced by the first violin and taken up by the cello, is the main preoccupation of the entire movement, and even the second subject (which the cello initiates) is a smoothed-out version of it. Again, the cello is often scored in a high register, with Mozart’s hoped-for patron in mind.

The slow movement is a work of such beauty that it prompted the customarily restrained Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein

to call it "one of the most sensitive movements in the whole literature of chamber music....It seems to mingle the bliss and sorrow of a farewell to life. How beautiful life has been! How sad! How brief!" The movement is made of the simplest elements imaginable—a short, gentle chordal figure, stated clearly at the start and retaining its identity throughout, as delicate ornamental lines surround it, transparent and airborne.

Mozart departed from tradition in the third movement: the theme of the sturdy Minuet is carried over into the Trio, which continues to elaborate upon it, almost in the manner of a development section. The final Allegro is a deft race to the finish line, a headlong surge of running sixteenth notes that allow only occasional pauses for breath.

Shirley Fleming

THE SHANGHAI QUARTET

Since its New York debut at Town Hall in the spring of 1987, the Shanghai Quartet has been hailed by the press and the public alike as one of the leading quartets of its generation. It now performs annually to exceptional critical acclaim in major music centers throughout the United States and abroad.

Shortly after the Quartet was formed at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, it won a top prize at the Portsmouth International Quartet Competition. In 1987 the ensemble won the prestigious Chicago Discovery competition and embarked on an intensive touring career. It has been Ensemble-in-Residence at the Tanglewood and Ravinia Festivals and has appeared on several occasions at Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival.

During the 1994-95 season the Quartet returned to Lincoln Center on the "Great Performers" series, in addition to appearing in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Detroit and Toronto, among many other cities. Recent seasons have also taken the Quartet to Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas, Milwaukee, Montreal, Phoenix, San Francisco, St. Louis and Vancouver. Its annual appearances in New York City have included a sold-out three-concert series with pianist Ruth Laredo at the Metropolitan Museum. The Quartet's other distinguished collaborators include pianists Peter Frankl and Lillian Kallir, guitarist Eliot Fisk, flutist Eugenia Zukerman, violist Arnold Steinhardt and cellist Carter Brey. The ensemble has also made several tours of Europe, giving concerts throughout Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom.

After leaving China, the Shanghai Quartet was coached by the Tokyo String Quartet and the Vermeer Quartet. In addition, it was Graduate Ensemble-in-Residence at the Juilliard School, where it assisted the Juilliard String Quartet. Currently, it is Ensemble-in-Residence at the University of Richmond in Virginia, teaching and coaching students, as well as performing its own three concert series annually.

The Shanghai Quartet may be heard on several Delos International compact discs. Its debut release, featuring works of Grieg and Mendelssohn, was released in early 1994 to exceptional critical acclaim. Also available are *Spirit Murmur*, a disc featuring quartet works by Alan Hovhaness and the Song of the Ch'in" by Chinese composer Zhou Long, and *Music for a Sunday Morning*, featuring works for strings and flute with Eugenia Zukerman. On the lighter side, The Shanghai Quartet is featured on both *Heigh-Ho! Mozart* and *Bibbidi Bobbidi Bach*, Delos' popular collections of favorite Disney tunes in the style of great classical composers.

Weigang Li, violin

A native of Shanghai, Weigang Li began violin studies with his parents at age 5 and went on to attend the Shanghai

Conservatory at age 14. He came to the United States in 1981 to study at the San Francisco Conservatory through an exchange program between the sister cities of San Francisco and Shanghai. In 1982 he appeared with the BBC Scottish Symphony in a concert that was recorded for broadcast. Mr. Li has been a soloist with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Shanghai Symphony and the Shanghai Conservatory Orchestra. Upon graduating from the Shanghai Conservatory in 1985, he was appointed Assistant Professor of Violin. Shortly thereafter he left China to continue his education at Northern Illinois University on a full scholarship, receiving his Masters Degree in 1987. For the next two years, Mr. Li studied and taught at the Juilliard School as teaching assistant to the Juilliard Quartet. His other teachers have included Shmuel Ashkenasi, Pierre Menard, Shu-Chen Tan, Mu-Chen Li and Isadore Tinkleman. Mr. Li was featured in the film *From Mao to Mozart – Isaac Stern in China*.

Yiwen Jiang, violin

Born in Beijing, Yiwen Jiang began his violin studies with his father at age 6. In 1981 he was accepted into the class of Professor Han Li at the Central Conservatory of Music. In 1985 he came

to the United States on a full scholarship to the St. Louis Conservatory. He also spent two summers in Dallas participating in master classes with Pinchas Zukerman. In 1990, with the support of the Ken Boxlet Foundation, he pursued additional studies at Rutgers University with Arnold Steinhardt of the Guarneri Quartet. A prize winner at the Mae M. Whitaker and Montreal competitions, he has appeared at many international music festivals, collaborating with such prominent artists as Alexander Schneider, Michael Tree, Jaime Laredo and Lynn Harrell. He has also appeared with the Central Opera House Orchestra in China, the Victoria Symphony and the Montreal Symphony. Mr. Jiang has performed for NBC and PBS television specials, National Public Radio, CPB in Beijing, WQXR in New York, and KFYO in St. Louis. He has recorded for the Record Corporation of China.

Honggang Li, viola

Honggang Li began violin studies with his parents at the same time as his brother, Weigang. He was selected to attend the Beijing Conservatory when it reopened in 1977. After continuing his training at the Shanghai Conservatory as a student of

Lina Yu, he was subsequently appointed to the faculty there in 1984. He studied with Pierre Menard and Shmuel Ashkenasi at Northern Illinois University, and also served as a teaching assistant at the Juilliard School. Mr. Li has appeared as soloist with the Shanghai Philharmonic and the Shanghai Conservatory Orchestra. In 1987 he won a 1757 DeCambel violin as a special prize given by Elisa Pegreffi of the Quartetto Italiano at the Paolo Borciani competition in Italy. Mr. Li joined the Shanghai Quartet as a violinist and became its violist with the addition of Yiwen Jiang in the summer of 1994.

James Wilson, cello

A native of Ann Arbor, Michigan, James Wilson was born into a musical family and began cello studies at age 11. He went on to graduate from the University of Michigan, where, as a student of Jeffrey Solow, he was the recipient of the music school's highest honor. He continued his studies with Stephen Kates at the Peabody Institute of Music and was twice selected as a participant in the Piatigorsky Seminar for Cellists.

Y O U N G P E O P L E ' S N O T E S

There are things about a genius that we will never understand. One genius in particular who has caused the world to marvel for the past 200 years is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (his middle name, by the way, means "love of god," from the Latin words "amare," to love, and "deus," god.) This god-loving composer wrote the most beautiful music even when he was sick, unhappy, and broke. He died when he was only 35 years old, but he never slowed down in his outpouring of works, and he never ran out of ideas.

He was in rather bad shape when he wrote the two string quartets we hear on this record-

ing, though you would never guess it. His wife was sick with a bad foot infection and needed to go to a summer resort for a cure, which was expensive. He himself had headaches, toothaches, and rheumatism. And he needed money in the worst way, and had to borrow from friends.

While he was trying to cope with all of this, he received a pleasant invitation: a wealthy nobleman who admired him was planning a trip from Vienna (where they both lived) to Berlin, and suggested that Mozart come along. It might prove to be good luck; the nobleman's plan was to meet in

Berlin with the King of Prussia, and Mozart realized that the King might very likely be willing to pay for music written in his honor. For the King had a hobby: he played the cello, and he took it very seriously.

We don't know how the meeting went—or even if it actually happened—but we do know that Mozart came back from Berlin full of plans to write no fewer than six string quartets for the King. As it happened, he finished only three, and they are known as the “Prussian” Quartets. Alas, they did not bring in the money Mozart had hoped for, and he had to sell them to his publisher very cheaply. They were the last string quartets he wrote.

The King of Prussia would have been happy, because Mozart made sure that the cello was especially important. In many string quartets that is not the case, because the cello, as the lowest of the four instruments, must concentrate on plugging away on the bottom while the higher instruments get to sing most of the tunes. But listen to the first movement of the Quartet in B-Flat, K. 589 (track 5) on this disk: after the high violin starts things off, the cello brings in the next two musical ideas and you can hear them very distinctly. And in the next movement, the cello gets the opening all to itself.

The first movement of the Quartet in F, K. 590 (track 1)

divides attention about evenly between the top violin and the cello. The following slow movement, which is one of the most beautiful Mozart ever wrote, makes sure that each instrument takes its turn in spinning out the delicate lines that wrap around the little hymn-like figure that you hear at the very beginning.

The clarity of this music makes it sound easy to play. But don't be fooled—the members of the Shanghai String Quartet practice together at least four hours a day, six days a week, and they have sometimes practiced nine or ten hours a day, just to capture this spirit of easiness. Weigang Li, who plays the first violin, says “If you can play Mozart well, you can play anything.”

And why is Mozart difficult? “It is hard to make the music sound good,” he says. “You can't go wrong in intonation (that is, you must be absolutely in tune). You have to be very accurate and yet you have to sound completely natural, as if you were making the music up as you go along.” The Quartet works out every detail in their practice—how to make the musical phrases flow gracefully, and which of the four instruments you should hear most at any given moment.

Mozart wrote 23 string quartets, and the Shanghai plays about half of them already. The rest will come. We have, therefore, a lot to look forward to.

Notes by Shirley Fleming

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