

Mozart's First Piano Quartet, K478

Francesca Dego and Federico Colli tell Charlotte Gardner about playing this pioneering work

‘Our first rehearsal at my house on Lake Garda is something I remember clearly,’ says pianist Federico Colli through my Zoom screen, having hit on the perfect memory to typify the dynamic between him, violinist Francesca Dego (also on this call), viola player Timothy Ridout and cellist Laura van der Heijden, as they prepared to record the two Mozart piano quartets – of which No 1 in G minor is currently open before us. ‘In the second recapitulation of the first movement,’ he continues, ‘when the theme appears in G minor, we very spontaneously found a super-*pianissimo*, and it was ... wow! To find this magic, unreal atmosphere so suddenly and naturally is, I think, a sort of trademark of our way of understanding this music – which is to find something new, always with respect, but to be innovative as much as Mozart wanted to be when writing it.’

Hop to that bar 182 moment on the disc, and it is indeed magical, and must have felt like a beautiful rubber-stamping of Chandos head Ralph Couzens’s wisdom in bringing together these four increasingly high-profile artists for the very first time – driven initially by Colli, who was already engaged in a Mozart project for the label and discussing with Couzens the importance of the piano quartets when he spotted fellow Chandos artist Dego was likewise recording a Mozart series. The recording was then preceded by a seven-date Italian tour, organised by Dego, for them to experience performing the quartets first, and to get to know each other.

Beyond typifying the four’s instant rapport, that above anecdote also turns out to contain many of our conversation’s principle themes, from the importance of contrasts and opposition, and how to interpret Mozart with both respect and freedom, to their decision to do absolutely all of the repeats, varying and embellishing as they go – although even before the first repeat mark the *Allegro*’s four opening bars (a stern *forte* six-note *tutti* unison statement, then two emotional solo piano bars featuring a falling figure descending to piano) have been heard multiple times and ways. ‘This first announcement is so dramatic, so operatic,’ exclaims Dego, ‘and it comes back in the first movement many times. So already I think we started to vary the intention, the weight of it, pretty much every time.’ Then there’s its emotional aspect. ‘It’s fascinating how Mozart has the piano alone in the third bar,’ continues Colli. ‘First there is this “destiny” theme, and then the heart coming from the piano. So in these first four bars we have all the quartet’s ingredients: the dynamics, the strings treated as a choir, the piano who has this soul, and the importance of communicating with each other.’

This brings us to Mozart’s clever balancing of roles, and what Ridout and van der Heijden bring to their respective lines. ‘Nobody had written for this grouping of instruments



Timothy Ridout, Francesca Dego, Laura van der Heijden and Federico Colli: a dream chamber team

before,’ enthuses Dego, ‘and we know that Mozart loved to play the viola in chamber music. So there’s this internal presence, and Tim, of course, is spectacular, managing to be special in every nuance. Then you have this motor of the cello, and I love how Laura interacted with us. The cello part isn’t as thematically dominant as the piano and violin, but she would just drive us in phrasing and directions in a very, very “present” way, and then when she had something to say, she would pipe up and really revolutionise what we were doing.’

Bar 134 of the development brings a key example of where, for the repeat only, they injected an entirely new colour. ‘We decided that the strings would take this almost tenuto, not separating, without too much vibrato,’ describes Dego, ‘non-expressive but very tense, an acidic feel to the sound quality, and with a forwards direction. I think the idea came from Tim, and it introduced this completely different feeling – really dramatic.’

We look admiringly at the movement’s *forte* final page, the piano part a sudden blizzard of semiquaver figures as the unison strings power out figures based on their opening theme, until a new dotted, ‘almost baroque’, rhythm catapults them to the final bar. ‘Of course, we know the story about Mozart losing the publisher’s commission for this quartet because it was too difficult for amateurs,’ muses Dego, ‘and it’s true – but the difficulty is also musical. You need to understand what it’s saying here, and create all the different voices. It isn’t one of the sight-readable things that were fashionable at that time. It has all the theatre, it has all of Mozart, it’s extraordinary.’

With the *Andante*, their major decision was not to treat it as a slow movement, rather reading *andante* as per its Italian meaning, 'going' – something Deگو learnt from Sir Roger Norrington as they recorded the Mozart violin concertos, and backed up by further clues in the score: the three-quavers-to-a-bar time signature; the strings' rising and falling demisemiquaver accompanying figures, whole bars of which are flowingly slurred into one bow; *détaché* cello semiquaver repeated notes. 'It means the tempo is moving, moving, moving,' emphasises Colli in regard to the repeated cello semiquavers. 'In those four bars from bar 43 which I have alone with the cello where it's doing that, I would sing the phrase with a lot of direction.'

Sustained debate between the players came at bars 47 to 48, where strings alone, *piano*, play a quaver, then four *portato* semiquavers, followed by two *staccatissimo* quavers, the second of which is suddenly *forte* – simple enough to look at, explains Deگو, but actually not interpretatively clear-cut. 'How much are the dots to be a surprise? How much does *portato* actually give direction towards that? Is there a crescendo? Are we actually doing almost a diminuendo with then the surprise of a *forte*? ...' She concludes, 'It ended up being a kind of mix of all these elements: we decided to give it direction as if we were preparing in speed, but then actually at the end coming back in dynamic, so it's like the sense of a crescendo, but dynamically almost a diminuendo, so you still have the surprise. Then on the *forte*, short but with air. And that was 15 minutes of the first rehearsal.'

'Played by a small string ensemble, the concertos K413, K414 and K415 are not very different from the piano quartets in sense, form, contents' – Federico Colli

High up in Colli's consciousness are the three Viennese piano concertos Mozart wrote just before the two quartets – K413, K414 and K415 – in whose first edition he stipulated that they could be played without brass and woodwind. 'Played by a small string ensemble, the concertos are not very different from these two quartets in sense, form, contents,' outlines Colli on the occurrence of two concerto-like elements in the quartet. First, in the *Andante*'s bar 74, where the strings break off and the piano proceeds alone. 'I understand these bars as a real cadenza,' he says, 'so I play with a lot of freedom, and don't count the beats.' Then as we turn over into the final Rondo's opening bars, 'This is typical for a piano concerto, the theme coming from the piano, and the bar 8 *tutti* entry being like a little chamber orchestra.'

In terms of tempo, meanwhile, Colli was also keen for them to take the Rondo's *alla breve Allegro moderato* as fast as they could, to provide a sparkling contrast to the first movement's theatrical drama. Mozart's self-references provide further sparkle – the bar 59 piano passage lifted straight from the K485 Rondo in D major, and bar 70 onwards coming from *Die Zauberflöte*. Yet more comes from the four's own embellishments, often made in the moment, of which a favourite is clearly bar 339, where everyone has straight quavers. 'Suddenly, Timothy started doing triplets in the middle,' remembers Deگو, 'and it was just such an explosion of joy! These kinds of things gave us a lot of happiness, and I do hope that comes across.' And it does. 🎵
The Mozart piano quartets album will be reviewed in our October issue

Jordi Savall



Released on Sept. 8th

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