Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) Clarinet Quintet in A, K581 (1789)

Allegro
Larghetto
Menuetto – Trio 1 – Trio 2
Allegretto con variazioni

The Clarinet Quintet is one of three pieces that Mozart wrote for his friend Anton Stadler – the other two being the Kegelstadt Trio and the Clarinet Concerto. He was a fellow Freemason of Mozart's, and a close friend. Their nicknames for each other, dreamt up on a long stage-coach journey to Prague, were Natschibinitschibi (Stadler) and Punkitititi (Mozart). Stadler usually played second clarinet to his younger brother Johann in the Vienna Court Orchestra, perhaps because he preferred the lower registers of the instrument. Around 1788, he collaborated with the clarinet maker Theodor Lotz to extend the range of the clarinet down a major third to the C below middle C. The resulting extended instrument is now known as a Basset Clarinet (not Basset Horn) but we know little about its original appearance. Mozart wrote both his Clarinet Concerto and this “Stadler's Quintet” for the new Basset Clarinet in A, but both autographs are lost. The quintet was first published by Johann André in 1802 as Oeuvre 108 with changes to fit the range of the more common clarinet in A, so it is not clear exactly what Mozart wrote. There are various conjectures over what might have been played in early performances: for example in bar 41 of the first movement the Bassett Clarinet can descend 3 octaves from written C, concert A to rich depths inaccessible to a conventional modern instrument.

Basset clarinets with modern keywork have been made since the 1950s in order to perform Mozart's works closer to the composer's intentions.

*** Note added after the performance: *** The above example of the 3-octave descending scale turned out to be a bad one. In rehearsal, the Endymion and the clarinettist Tony Pay realised that the descent to a bottom (written) C produced inappropriate chording with the strings – specifically putting the clarinet on (sounding) A a 9th below the cello's B. So they played the passage with the last octave rising. ***

The quintet dates from 1789, two years before Mozart's death, and is contemporary with Cosi fan tutte and the first two of the "Prussian" string quartets (K.575 & 589). In style, it belongs more with earlier works of the 1780s than with the more economic, austere and contrapuntal style of his later works. The quintet is deservedly one of Mozart's best-loved works and shows Mozart's extraordinary ability to exploit the varied sides of the newly-created instrument's character: by turns, lyrical, sombre, jaunty, threatening. The strings have a generous share in the glories of the piece, introducing both main themes in the first movement and having the whole of the first of two Trios to themselves. The viola in particular matches the clarinet for poignant lyricism in the third of the last movement's variations; perhaps Punkitititi was showing Natschibinitschibi that his viola was a match for the new-fangled Basset Clarinet.