

Juan Chrisostomos Arriaga (Spain, 1806 – 1826) was only 19 when he died, but his prodigious musical talents led him to leave a small number of masterpieces behind, including three string quartets, a symphony, two operas, a nonet, and several works for church.

The epithet “Spanish Mozart” is often given to him, as the two composers had an eerily large amount in common. Both were born on January 27th exactly 50 years apart; both had the same first two baptized names (Johannes Chrysostomus for Mozart); and both showed extraordinary musical talent for composition and the violin from a young age. However, “Spanish Mendelssohn” might be a more fitting appellation, for not only were Arriaga and Mendelssohn musical prodigies, they were also contemporaries with comparable upbringings – cultured, wealthy, with amateur musician fathers – and had similar fresh, energetic musical styles. Both were also outsiders in their communities: Arriaga for being Basque in Spain and Mendelssohn for being Jewish in Germany.

Arriaga was already playing the violin in a string quartet at age 11, at which time he wrote his first serious work (his nonet). At age 14, he moved to Paris to study at the Conservatoire, and at age 18, he became the youngest professor the Conservatoire had ever had, teaching composition, counterpoint, and harmony. It was when he was 17 that he wrote his three string quartets, although the exact date of composition is uncertain. His unfortunate death a few weeks before his 20th birthday due to an unknown ailment (perhaps a respiratory infection) was heartbreaking for his colleagues and family. However, he was not well known publicly – unlike Mendelssohn – and was buried without tombstone in a common grave. Although he remains in relative obscurity to this day, for those who know of him, the speculation continues to grow about what wonders he could have accomplished had he lived longer.

The first movement of the first quartet is replete with interesting twists, turns, and charming moments, and its natural vigor speaks of Arriaga’s youthfulness. It has two principal themes, the first in D minor and the second ambiguously in F major/F minor, although its final presentation is clearly in F major. Arriaga shows his innate facility with the quartet medium in this movement, as all four instruments contribute equally to its interesting, lively texture.

The second movement is pensive and heartfelt, with the violin and cello conversing throughout. It ends sweetly with solos in the viola and cello over pizzicati in the violins. The third movement is reminiscent of a Beethoven minuet in its conception, although the first section of the minuet and the second section of the trio do not repeat. The trio’s melody is a popular Spanish air, Arriaga’s only use of authentic Spanish material in the entire work.

The fourth movement opens with a slow, expressive adagio that leads to a lilting melody in an allegretto section. The adagio section returns later, followed by a varied form of the allegretto melody. Then, after dabbling with D major, the piece ends softly in D minor.