Mozart’s Divertimento in D major, K. 125a, is one of a set of three written in Salzburg during the winter months of 1772, after he had returned from his second journey to Italy. The southern influence certainly seems present in these works, for they all use the three-movement structure then popular in Italian symphonies, direct descendants of Italian three-part opera overtures. The Divertimentos also contain clear echoes of the young Mozart’s most admired composers, Joseph Haydn and Johann Christian Bach.

All three movements of the D major Divertimento rely on sonata form, but with relatively short development sections. The first movement features the violins in a concertante manner—in other words, the interest is focused almost exclusively on their virtuosic runs and figurations while the violas and bass line provide a more or less constant rhythmic drive in eighth notes. The slow movement unfolds with lilting grace; its development lasts only seven measures. The last movement exhibits a lighthearted approach; even when contrapuntal texture appears in the development, Mozart gives it a playful touch. The second theme of this finale charms with its utter simplicity, ascending and descending stepwise in tenths.

The three Divertimentos, K. 125a, b, and c (K. 136–138), present interesting questions similar to those surrounding the famous Eine kleine Nachtmusik: were these works meant to be performed as string quartets or by larger string ensembles? Though they sound equally compelling in both guises, historical evidence suggests that Mozart envisioned them being played one on a part—either by the typical string quartet or the “divertimento quartet” comprised of two violins, viola, and bass. Mozart expert Alfred Einstein suggested that Mozart and his father might have taken the three Divertimentos along to Milan with a view toward turning them into symphonies, if asked, by adding oboe and horn parts, thus supporting the idea of their orchestral performance.

Scholars even differ as to the correct title of these pieces, calling them sometimes “Quartett-Divertimenti” or “Salzburg-Symphonies”; on the original autograph score, the title “Divertimento” was penned by someone other than Mozart. A further count against calling them divertimentos might be their lack of minuets, since conventional divertimentos were expected to contain one or two such dance movements. If, however, one takes the broadest definition of the word “divertimento,” namely entertainment or amusement, these works provide just that.