

MasterWorks 4: An Evening with Mozart Program Notes

Overture to *Don Giovanni*, K. 527

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Written: 1786

Movements: One

Style: Classical

Duration: 7 minutes

For opera composers, often times the last thing they write is the overture. After all, it has taken months to work out the details for three hours of music. What could be easier than dashing off a short little piece based upon the catchier tunes you've just written? This attitude, along with Mozart's penchant for procrastination, can explain why he found himself with no overture to his new opera, *Don Giovanni*, with less than 24 hours to go before its premiere. George Nissen, the man who married Mozart's widow, recounted the comical episode:

“The evening before the production of *Don Giovanni* at Prague, the dress rehearsal having already taken place, he said to his wife that he would write the overture during the night if she would sit with him and make him some punch to keep his spirits up. This she did, and told him tales about Aladdin's lamp, Cinderella, etc., which made him laugh till the tears came. But the punch made him sleepy, so that he dozed when she left off, and only worked as long as she told tales. At last the excitement, the sleepiness, and his frequent efforts not to doze off were too much for him, and his wife persuaded him to go to sleep on the sofa promising to wake him in an hour. But he slept so soundly that she could not find it in her heart to wake him until two hours had passed. It was then five o'clock. At seven o'clock the overture was finished and in the hands of the copyist.”

Sound preposterous? Ernest Newman insists that it was true. Composition for Mozart “meant developing the work in his head; he found the business of writing it out rather tiresome, and he would often postpone it as long as he could. ... There can be little doubt that the Overture to *Don Giovanni* had been worked out in his head long before the final rehearsal and that all he had to do on that historic night was to put the notes on paper.”

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The opera tells the tale of the famous seducer Don Juan who, in the first act, kills the Commendatore, the father of Donna Anna. The Commendatore returns in the final act of the opera in the form of a statue – or “stone guest” as it was called in several of the plays on which Mozart based his opera – to drag an unrepentant Don Juan to his awful fate. The overture begins with the same imposing music that Mozart used to introduce the stone guest in last act. It then proceeds to a faster section that may describe the Don himself or perhaps as “justice pursuing the mercurial seducer.”

Symphony No. 25 in G Minor, K. 183 (K. 173b)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Written: 1773

Movements: Four

Style: Classical

Duration: 25 minutes

A standard listing of Mozart’s works shows that he wrote forty-one symphonies. In actuality, he wrote many more than that. In his great book, *Mozart’s Symphonies*, Neal Zaslaw writes that if you try to “account for every symphony that has ever been associated with the name of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart” you would get nearly one hundred. Remarkable! Now consider that he only wrote six symphonies during the last eleven years of his life. He wrote the rest—however many that may be—before he turned the age of twenty-five!

Throughout his childhood, Mozart travelled throughout Europe with his overly zealous father, Leopold. The dad wanted to show off his *wunderkind* and make a lot of money. He also wanted to secure long-term employment for his son at some sort of aristocratic court. Wolfgang was wildly successful as a performer, but he never got the court appointment he wanted. Resistance to the Mozarts came from the top. When Archduke Ferdinand of Lombardy asked his mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, for permission to hire Mozart, this was her reply:

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“I do not know why, not believing you have need of a composer or of useless people. What I say is intended only to prevent your burdening yourself with useless people and giving titles to people of that sort. ... Besides, he has a large family.”

The young Mozart’s travels enabled him to hear the new trends in music outside of his conservative hometown of Salzburg. One of those trends was the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) style championed by Franz Joseph Haydn. It was a reaction to the cool rationalism of the Enlightenment and gave free expression to extreme emotion. Mozart tried his hand with *Sturm und Drang* on a trip to Italy in 1772 when he wrote the opera *Lucio Silla* for Milan. (The audiences didn’t like it.) In 1773, back in his hometown apparently for good, Mozart tried out *Sturm und Drang* in a symphony.

The Symphony No. 25 in G minor is only one of two symphonies that Mozart wrote in a minor key. (The other one is also in G minor and was written at almost exactly the same time as the other symphony on tonight’s program). The opening of the first movement, with its syncopation, dramatic gestures, and plaintive oboe solo is, indeed, full of stormy emotion. A short secondary theme is light and airy; contrast is another hallmark of *Sturm und Drang*.

The second movement—in a major key—gives needed respite from all of the fury. Sighing melodic fragments make up the main theme of this movement, but it is not overly sad. Only briefly, in the middle of the movement, is there any real hint of gloom. For the third movement, normally the lightest and cheeriest part of a symphony, a stark minor key returns. The central trio section uses only the woodwinds and horn. The style is happy, but not rambunctious. The final movement begins with the orchestra playing in unison in a hushed manner. Then, the fury of the storm returns.

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Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K. 551 **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)**

Written: 1788

Movements: Four

Style: Classical

Duration: 35 minutes

Given today's financial climate, Mozart's situation in 1788 has added poignancy. The prospect of a new, lucrative job had just fallen through. Emperor Joseph's court composer had just died, and Mozart was hoping to be the replacement. The emperor did give Mozart a job, but it wasn't what he was expecting. He was to write little dance tunes for the court for disappointingly small pay: "too much for what I do; too little for what I could do." In order to economize, Mozart moved his family to smaller accommodations further away from the center of activity: "I consider this will do equally well, if not better, for I have little to do in the town, and without the hindrance of numerous visitors I shall have more time for work ... while these rooms will be cheaper and pleasanter, too ..."

In spite of his economizing, Mozart was desperately in need of cash. In June he wrote to his fellow Mason Michael Puchberg, almost begging for a loan:

"If you would be so kind, so friendly, as to lend me the sum of one or two thousand gulden for a period of one or two years, at suitable interest, you would be doing me a most radical service! You will no doubt yourself realize and acknowledge that it is inconvenient, nay, impossible, to live from one installment of income to another! Without a certain necessary capital sum it is impossible to keep one's affairs in order. Nothing can be done with nothing!"

In spite of his straightened circumstances, Mozart was churning out music at a furious rate. In the space of just over two months, he wrote the three symphonies—the last he would ever write—that are the crowning achievements of his entire symphonic output. They may have been for a series of subscription concerts scheduled for the summer, but there is no record of them actually

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happening. In addition, there is no record of the first performance of any of these symphonies or, indeed, of *any* performance of them during the remaining years of his life.

You might expect Mozart's music from such gloomy circumstances to be gloomy itself. Not so! Instead, he gives us the full range of classical emotions in those three symphonies.

The Symphony No. 41 in C Major is the last of the last three. The title "Jupiter," which often accompanies it, is nothing that Mozart ever thought of. Instead, Johann Peter Salomon, the impresario who was responsible for bringing Franz Joseph Haydn to London, seems to have added the title. Perhaps it is the "pomp of the opening of the first movement, with its military use of trumpets and kettledrums and stately dotted rhythms ... calculated to evoke images of nobility and godliness in the eighteenth-century mind" that conjured up the image of Jupiter for Salomon.

The first movement is stately – at times. However, for a secondary theme in the first movement, Mozart re-used a tune from an aria he wrote a few months earlier, "Un bacio di mano" (A kiss on the hand). Some of the words are "you are a bit dense, my dear Pompeo, go and study the ways of the world." Hardly noble and god-like! The second movement, with its muted strings, has its occasional passionate outbursts. The third movement is a dignified minuet. In the fourth movement, it is as if Mozart has decided to show off all of his skills as a composer by his clever interlacing of melodies. He weaves no fewer than five different tunes together. It is of this remarkable movement that Eric Blom writes:

"There is a mystery in this music not to be solved by analysis or criticism, and perhaps only just to be apprehended by the imagination. We can understand the utter simplicity; we can also, with an effort, comprehend the immense technical skill with which its elaborate fabric is woven; what remains forever a riddle is how any human being could manage to combine these two opposites into such a perfectly balanced work of art.