

PROGRAM NOTES

Rossini: Overture from *La Scala di Seta*

The *farsa*, a one-act Venetian theatrical genre that flourished during the late 18th and early 19th century, provided a simple entry opportunity for many aspiring young opera composers. Indeed, five of Rossini's first nine operas were *farsa*, including *La Scala di Seta* (The Silken Ladder), which received its premiere on May 9, 1812 at Venice's *Teatro San Moisè*, the most famous venue for such works. Although productions of *farsa* are rarely mounted today, the overtures from several of Rossini's still maintain a stature alongside those of his larger scale operas as perennial audience favorites.

The composition of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (The Barber of Seville), the *opera buffa* masterpiece that would forever secure Rossini's international fame, was still four years away. Yet, the overture to *La Scala di Seta* already displays the effective comic techniques that the 20-year-old Rossini would continue throughout his career. Constantly running eighth notes against a simple harmonic accompaniment provide the background for the lively banter between contrasting instruments, and several instances of the famous "Rossini crescendo" already work their humorous magic.

Mozart: *Don Giovanni*, K. 527 - Arias and Duet from Act I

The remainder of today's program focuses on three works from the end of Mozart's career, specifically within the single-year span of summer 1787 to that of 1788. The sheer range of expression in these compositions astonishes, from the darkly comic drama of *Don Giovanni* to the classical purity of the carefree *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, and the tragic romantic pathos of the revolutionary Symphony No. 40.

The two-act opera *Don Giovanni* with music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte received its premiere by the Prague Italian opera at the National Theater of Bohemia on October 29, 1787 – the day after it was completed. It is an example of a *dramma giocoso*, which combines both comic and serious elements. Certain characters like Donna Anna are portrayed in serious style, while others, including Don Giovanni's servant Leporello, are characterized as *buffo* (comic). The role of the title character lies in the realm of *mezza carraterre*, which hovers between both serious and comic grounds.

The plot of Act I centers around a Spanish libertine Don Giovanni and his various amorous conquests. The action begins with Donna Anna fleeing from the unwanted advances of Don Giovanni. When her father, the Commendatore steps in to defend her honor, he is killed by Don Giovanni, after which Donna Anna demands that her fiancé Don Ottavio take an oath of vengeance for the crime. While Giovanni and his servant Leporello are later arguing about Giovanni's immoral behaviors, they hear a woman Donna Elvira singing of her sadness over being spurned by her lover. Upon attempting to make advances to her, Don Giovanni is revealed as the mourned deserter, becoming once more the object of justifiable vengeance. His next amorous escapade begins following the peasant wedding of Masetto to his lovely bride Zerlina – After displacing Masetto through the distraction of a reception to be hosted at his palace, Giovanni attempts to seduce Zerlina in the duet "**La ci darem la mano.**" (Give me your hand). Donna Elvira, however, thwarts his ploy by barging in to warn Zerlina to "flee from the traitor" ("**Ah, fuggi il traditor!**"). With Leporello's news of the wedding guests' arrival at his master's house, the promiscuous Don Giovanni, optimistic about adding maybe ten new conquests, instructs him in the famous "Champagne Aria," "**Fin ch'han dal vino calda la testa**" (Till they are tipsy) to organize a party and invite every girl he can find. Meanwhile, in the garden of Giovanni's palace, applying her own seductive mixture of naïve vulnerability and manipulative calculation, Zerlina appeases the jealous Masetto with her repentant invitation to "**Batti, batti o bel Masetto**" (Beat, O beat me, handsome Masetto). The couple is soon invited in for the masquerade ball, along with Donna Anna, Elvira, and Ottavio. Following another advance by Giovanni on

Zerlina, she cries for help. Act One ends with the the wronged parties together exposing Don Giovanni, who manages in his usual manner to slip away.

Mozart: *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, K.525

Little is known of the circumstances surrounding the composition of the serenade *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, K.525, other than that it was completed in Vienna on August 10, 1787, during which time Mozart had been in the process of completing the second act of *Don Giovanni*. First sold by his widow to a publisher along with other manuscripts eight years after Mozart's death, it remained unpublished until 1827 – forty years after its composition.

The work's literal translation "A Little Night Music" alludes to the original function of a serenade, a courtship song typically sung at night, although the modern genre was by Mozart's time variably termed a *serenade* or *divertimento*. Such gently pleasing music was popular in the parks and pleasure gardens of Vienna, the city in which Mozart spent the last decade of his life, so this would most likely have been the intended purpose of this serenade.

The overall structure of the work resembles that of a miniature string symphony, including the design that all except for the slow movement are cast in the home key, in this case G Major. As a serenade, however, this work is untouched by the conflict, asymmetries, or disturbances that lend drama and emotional expression to the deeper Mozart, represented by the two concurrently composed companion works on today's program. This side of Mozart embraces instead the Classical ideals in the purest sense – those of perfection, balance, simplicity, transparency and freedom from struggle. Musically it exhibits the elegant traits of the *style galant* – the profusion of short decorative ornaments, proportionally symmetrical phrases, with no evidence of the later "forced expression" of the *empfindsamer Stil* that had affected the composer for more than a decade.

Perhaps no melodic Mozart theme is more universally familiar than the rising and falling arpeggiated "Mannheim Rocket" figure that opens the Allegro of *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. The lyrical second theme of this sonata-allegro movement begins with a rhythmically crushed figure, another common feature of the *galant* style. As expected in a serenade, the key relationships are simple, including second and closing themes in the dominant key of D major. The development is diversionary, rather than dramatic, remaining in the dominant key and shifting through its parallel minor and finally to the subdominant (C Major) of the home key.

The idyllic Romanza is in ABACA rondo form, with the "C" section in the minor mode. Even so, short decorative turns ornament the melody, along with a dialogue between upper and lower parts, defusing any danger of seriousness. The third movement is a typical Minuet with Allegretto character, $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, and graceful character. Each eight-bar phrase is of classical perfection, divided into balanced antecedent/consequent halves. The lively, classically transparent Rondo that concludes the serenade bubbles with Italianate repeated notes, delicate articulations and expressive "sigh" figures.

Mozart: Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550

Few works in the repertory have been more thoroughly discussed and written about than Mozart's Symphony No. 40 (with the current program notes now being added to that voluminous literature). It has long held its place as the high point of Classical perfection, while its progressive forward strides have also established its status as the harbinger of the Romantic period.

Typical of composers of his time, Mozart produced works according to commission. Yet, the purpose of the last three symphonies (Nos. 39-41) remains largely unknown, and they were until recently believed to have been composed with unfulfilled hopes for an audience or sponsor. While circumstantial evidence now suggests that Mozart might possibly have heard performances of these, what is certain is that all three symphonies were completed, alongside concurrent projects, within a span of a mere ten weeks during the

summer of 1788, with the G minor symphony dated July 25th.

In place of the bright optimism of the major mode overwhelmingly favored during the Classic era, Symphony No. 40 was one of only two Mozart symphonies in the minor mode. Notably, the other of these, Symphony No. 25 was set in the very same key of G minor in 1773, representing his exploration of the new musical language of the emotionally overwrought *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) movement. “Storm and Stress” might well also describe the challenging circumstances of Mozart’s life during that summer of 1788. Financial difficulties continued to plague him, forcing him to procure personal loans from a fellow Mason and friend during this time. A fickle Viennese public was offering a lackluster reception of his newest opera *Don Giovanni*, which had been highly successful in Prague the previous fall. To add to the troubles, Mozart’s father had just died, and his wife was now experiencing health problems. Not surprisingly, Mozart had written of “dark thoughts” during this trying period, confirming the effect of these circumstances.

Besides the unconventional minor key, the opening of the Symphony No. 40 is startling in nearly every way possible. In place of the customary grandiose *tutti* that opens a symphony is the dark timbre of the violas, which set the work into motion with a soft, but urgently agitated vamp. Such a whispered opening is unprecedented in symphonic literature, but would become a mainstay in the future, as in the Ninth Symphonies of both Beethoven and Schubert and in several of Bruckner’s symphonies. Indeed, Mozart’s Symphony No. 40 is a progressive work that looks prophetically into the future of the nineteenth century. The anguished first theme is not the usual Italianate Mozartian melody, but a series of terse three-note “sigh” motives that fester with anxiety. A transition of more positive character, however, soon leads into the light of the major mode and to the lyrical second theme. The new theme’s contrast between a gracefully expressive downward chromatic figure and an elegant dancelike gesture are more recognizably Mozartian. An extroverted closing theme completes the journey from the distressed onset, brings the Exposition to a confident conclusion, only to be haunted momentarily by reminders of Theme One. The Development section is of almost Beethovenian conflict, pitting orchestral timbres and conflicting keys against one another. As expected, the Recapitulation confirms the home key of G minor, leaving the movement in the darkness with which it began.

Typical of the symphony at this time, the slow movement differs in key from the other three, in this case the warm relative major key of Eb. The calm center amid a turbulent environment, this Andante begins in the celli and basses, gradually blooming upwards in register into the other strings and horns. An incidental *galant* Scotch snap rhythm first encountered in the low strings is taken up by the violins, and finally by the entire orchestra, where it becomes dramatically expansive in the center of the movement.

Now freed from its associations as the graceful dance of the courts, the minuet of Mozart’s late symphonies bursts with a robust confidence, as does the third movement of this symphony. The presence of the minor mode here, however, tinges the musical character instead with something more troubled. Defiant hemiolas (groups of two beats) pulling against the native $\frac{3}{4}$ meter of the Minuet create a powerful tension throughout the outer sections. With its harmonic simplicity and rhythmic stability, the Trio in the parallel major key of G major is a welcome refuge. Like many of Haydn’s trio sections, its style is that of a *Ländler*, a country dance in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, with an expressively gentle character that is enhanced by the congenial trading of phrases between strings and winds before the *da capo* return of the tragic Minuet section. Strings send up “Mannheim rocket” figures that are answered combatively by the entire orchestra at the opening of the energetic finale. No psychological resolution of the symphony takes place, as the dark key of G minor persists to the end of the final bar.

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