

Masterworks 3 All Mozart
Fort Wayne Philharmonic

PROGRAM NOTES

Overture to *La clemenza di Tito*, K.621

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

(b. 1756, Salzburg, Austria; d. 1791, Vienna, Austria)

Although most people believe *The Magic Flute* was Mozart's last opera, most of it had already been completed when the composer turned to a last-minute commission for another opera to celebrate the Prague coronation of the new Austrian emperor, Leopold II, as King of Bohemia. Mozart only received the commission for *La clemenza di Tito* in the latter half of July and had to complete the opera for performance before the royal couple on September 6, the evening before the coronation. The deadline was nearly impossible: he was still completing *The Magic Flute*, had that mysterious commission for a Requiem hanging over his head, and did not even have a libretto for the new work. Nevertheless, Mozart jumped at the opportunity to curry favor with the new emperor.

Legend says — and it is likely close to the truth — that Mozart composed this entire score in 18 days, creating several numbers in the carriage that carried him to Prague. The opera was a throwback to the static, aria-packed *opera seria* tradition from earlier in the century. It was based on an already shop-worn Pietro Metastasio libretto, which Caterino Mazollà hastily cobbled into a workable drama for Mozart. In a gracious gesture to the new monarch, it concerned the remarkable wisdom and mercy of the Roman Emperor Titus, who spares the lives of both his best friend and the jealous daughter of the previous emperor after they try to assassinate him.

The overture is a grand C-Major work, whose pompous opening is perfectly suited to a great state occasion. An exquisite woodwind passage of pure Mozartean lyricism forms its second theme, and, out of order, later opens the recapitulation section so that the curtain can rise with the stately opening music. The fury of the jealous anti-heroine, Vitellia, is previewed by some fine melodramatic dissonances.

Piano Concerto No. 25 in C Major, K.503

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

In the middle 1780s, Mozart was at the peak of his popularity with the piano-mad audiences of Vienna. Both his virtuosity as a keyboard artist and his creativity as a composer drew large audiences to his frequent solo concerts in the city and earned him a substantial income. Between 1784 and 1786, his constant need for new performing material produced 12 magnificent piano concertos: the greatest sustained achievement by any composer working in this genre.

Tonight we will hear the last of these concertos, Piano Concerto No. 25 in C Major, which he completed on December 4, 1786. Together with its immediate predecessor, the daring Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor, it represents one of the twin peaks of this mountain range of masterpieces.

The year 1786 had been a remarkable one even by Mozart's prolific standards. He had earlier composed the richly humane operatic comedy *The Marriage of Figaro*, and simultaneously with this Concerto, he wrote one of his finest symphonies, the "Prague." But already his popularity with the Viennese public was beginning to wane, for he insisted on challenging his audiences, not simply entertaining them. There would be no more solo appearances for him in Vienna after 1786.

In many ways, Piano Concerto No. 25 is the concerto equivalent of Mozart's last symphony, the "Jupiter." Like the "Jupiter," it is in C Major (a key Mozart associated with big ceremonial works) and has a similar grandeur of scale and rhetoric. And also like the "Jupiter," it makes extensive use of stock melodic and rhythmic patterns of late-18th-century music, while elevating them to an expressive level other composers could not reach.

The opening of the sonata-form **first movement** is a striking example of this transfiguration of the commonplace. Instead of a melodic theme, we hear just a series of imperial fanfares and outlines of chords. Violins gently introduce a Beethoven-esque five-note motive that will grow bolder and pervade the whole movement. After a brief pause, a real theme grows out of this pattern: a wry

military march in the minor mode that haunts the memory. When it repeats in the major, Mozart adds a beautiful countermelody in the flute.

Now the pianist enters very modestly and slowly with a decorated version of the five-note rhythmic motive. Then he proposes a new lyrical theme: a winsome Mozart melody that has nothing to do with grandeur. This solo exposition closes with the orchestra thundering the rhythmic motive, now reduced to just four notes.

The piano launches the development section with the theme it had avoided earlier — the wonderful minor-mode march. This builds into one of Mozart's greatest developments, in which feisty woodwinds collaborate on equal terms with the piano in ingenious contrapuntal play. Indeed, throughout this Concerto orchestra and soloist are equal partners participating in a fascinating, ever-changing relationship.

For the **slow movement**, the orchestra creates an atmosphere of silvery nocturnal serenity much like the final act of *Figaro*. One can almost see the opera's characters creeping through the shadows of a darkened formal garden, their whispered plots drifting through the air. The piano slips in gently to add to the spell. Listen to the gorgeous woodwind parts — flutes, oboes, bassoon, horns — weaving their magic along with the soloist.

Earlier in 1786, Mozart had revised his 1781 opera *Idomeneo* for its Viennese premiere. So it's not surprising that he borrowed a melody from its ballet music to become the appealing repeated-note refrain for his rondo-form **finale**. However, it *is* surprising that the orchestra, rather than the soloist, introduces this theme. As trumpets and timpani enter, this refrain takes on a grandeur we wouldn't expect from its modest beginning. The finale's dramatic, harmonically questing middle episode brings a beautiful surprise: a rapturous Mozartean melody sung by the piano and woodwind soloists that is perhaps the Concerto's most sublime moment. Throughout, the piano part manages to be both subtly eloquent and brilliantly showy — a supreme demonstration of Mozart's art as both creator and performer.

Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K. 543

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart's final three symphonies are among the most astonishing creations in musical history. Not only are they his greatest symphonies —and each completely different from its mates — but they were composed in just six weeks' time during the summer of 1788. To add to their mystique, it was long believed that Mozart wrote them without any commission or external stimulus and that they were, tragically, never performed during his lifetime.

But Mozart scholar Neal Zaslaw has made a strong case that this was not so. He has found much circumstantial evidence that these works were indeed performed over the last three years of the composer's life. "The very idea that Mozart would have written three such works, unprecedented in length and complexity, only to please himself or because he was inspired, flies in the face of his known attitudes to music and life, and the financial straits in which he then found himself," writes Zaslaw. "While he may often have found great personal pleasure in composing, ... he composed to pay his rent and be a useful member of society. ... His symphonies were not art for art's sake, but music for use."

In the summer of 1788, Mozart was indeed in severe financial straits. His popularity with the fickle Viennese public had waned, the local concert scene was much reduced by a costly war between Austria and Turkey, and his annual income had dropped to an all-time low. As he was composing this symphony (completed June 26, 1788), he began writing a series of pleading letters to his fellow Mason Michael Puchberg begging for large loans, to which Puchberg (and others) generously responded.

Zaslaw suggests Mozart also may have been building an introductory portfolio for London with these symphonies; both he and Haydn had been invited by the impresario Johann Peter Salomon to come to England, but only Haydn finally went and triumphed. And, interestingly, Symphony No. 39 has the influence of Haydn — the only composer Mozart considered his equal — all over it, from its slow introduction (rare in Mozart symphonies) to its rollicking, witty finale. It is grandly scored for trumpets and timpani, as well as woodwinds (with Mozart's favorite clarinets replacing oboes) and strings.

The **first movement's** slow introduction immediately seizes our attention with loud fanfares, and its drama is accentuated by pungent dissonances. Notice the rapid descending scales in the violins; they will become a prominent feature in the main *Allegro* section. The *Allegro's* gracious principal theme slips in quietly, as though we had suddenly opened the drawing room door on a conversation in progress. Throughout this sonata-form movement, supple, lyrical passages compete with loud, rhythmically driven ones, which ultimately dominate.

The ***Andante con moto* second movement** is an adventurous struggle between Romantic passion and Classical control. A prim rhythmic theme gives Mozart startling developmental possibilities as the movement progresses. More startling still are two wild minor-mode interruptions, which threaten to tear the movement apart with their unbridled passion and extreme dissonance. After each of these outbursts, the orchestra manages — barely — to recover its poise with soothing woodwind music and consoling responses from the violins.

Trumpets and timpani return for the very grand **minuet**, whose chugging strings exude virile energy. The middle trio section prominently features the two clarinets, the upper taking the melody and the lower providing a burbling accompaniment. The melody here was borrowed from a folk *ländler*, the Austrian forerunner of the waltz.

The **finale** is a real barnburner in the humorous, high-spirited style of Haydn. Also à la Haydn, it uses just one hurtling theme to propel its sonata-form course. Particularly delicious is the marvelous fiddle passagework that gives this movement the feeling of a kick-up-your-heels Austrian hoedown. Mozart tips his hat one more time to Papa Haydn with an abrupt, witty close.