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MUSIC / EUROPE

Mahler Chamber Orchestra

Program
Notes

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Symphony No.39 in E-flat major, K.543 (Completed Vienna, 26 June 1788)

Adagio—Allegro

Andante con moto

Menuetto (Allegretto)—Trio—Menuetto

Finale—Allegro

Symphony No.40 in G minor, K.550 (Vienna, 25 July 1788)

Molto allegro

Andante

Menuetto (Allegretto)—Trio—Menuetto

Allegro assai

Symphony No.41 in C major, K.551 'Jupiter' (Vienna, 10 August 1788)

Allegro vivace

Andante cantabile

Menuetto (Allegretto)—Trio—Menuetto

Molto allegro

Producing over 50 symphonies (the official number 41 notwithstanding) in the space of 23 years, Mozart can truly be said to have enjoyed a 'symphonic career', much as did his older friend Joseph Haydn (over 100 symphonies in 38 years). And as symphonic careers go, it was, like Haydn's, successful from first to last. Mozart composed his Symphony No.1 – perhaps with a little help from his sister and father – in the London suburb of Chelsea in summer 1764. Generically and stylistically, it dots all the 'i's and crosses the 't's, almost as convincingly as do the symphonies of one of his London mentors, Johann Christian Bach, works indeed said to have 'influenced' the eight-year-old's first attempt. Between 15 and 18, he produced all of what now count as his 'middle period' symphonies (Nos 14-30, and at least five unnumbered). These works soak up influences almost promiscuously; No.25 (the other G minor) seems to ventriloquise the 'storm and stress' of Gluck and mid-period Haydn, whilst No.29 (A major) displays a blend of the elegant and eloquent and skittishly agitated (a Mozart personality trait) that would soon morph into a distinctive trademark.

After relocating from Salzburg to Vienna in 1781, however, piano concertos took over as Mozart's preferred orchestral vehicle, better for charming fickle metropolitan audiences than the more esoteric symphony. As he wrote to his father of his first Viennese offerings, they struck 'a happy medium between the too easy and the too difficult; brilliant, pleasing, natural, without being vapid; appealing to connoisseurs and the uninitiated alike', a formula that still served, a dozen concertos later, when he presented the last of his regular subscription concerts in the pre-Christmas season of 1786.

New symphonies were not entirely absent from his Vienna concerts, but all of them from these years were, in the first instance, out-of-town commissions: No.35 for the Haffner family in Salzburg in 1782; No.36 and the so-called No.37 (most of it actually by Michael Haydn) for a concert in Linz in 1783; and No.38 for Prague in 1787, during the season there of his opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. On 24 February 1788, only months before starting on these next three symphonies, he finished his Piano Concerto No.26 ('Coronation'). Then in May, the imperial theatre in Vienna unveiled for hometown audiences his latest Italian opera, *Don Giovanni (or the Libertine Punished)*, premiered in Prague the previous October. The tepid reception it received perhaps explains why Mozart devoted much of the sultry Viennese summer that year to composing three new symphonies, Nos 39-41, works that, like their immediate predecessors, were unlikely to appeal greatly to the Viennese. By then, Austria was at war with Ottoman Turkey. Accordingly, most of his patrons were also feeling the economic pinch, and Mozart's plans to give another concert series, at which the new symphonies might have been performed, came to nothing. However, it may well have been with one eye to possible publication and performances in England, France, and Germany that he completed the trilogy in quick succession between June and August.

Here again, Mozart was probably emulating Joseph Haydn. In December 1787, the Vienna firm Artaria published Haydn's new set of six 'Paris' Symphonies, issued in two sets of three. The first set contained symphonies in C major (No.82), G minor (No.83) and E flat (No.84). Given the rarity of G minor symphonies, it can hardly be mere coincidence that Mozart chose exactly the same three keys for his new trilogy. Clearly, if Haydn could publish symphonies, presumably with hope of financial return, Mozart too, then saddled with debts, might as well try. He had, after all, successfully undertaken a similar copycat project a few years earlier when, following on from Artaria's 1782 first edition of Haydn's Op.33 string quartets, he composed a set of his own (since referred to, fittingly, as Mozart's 'Haydn' quartets).

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

Another small token of Haydn's legacy can be found in Mozart's first new symphony in E-flat. Like Haydn's E-flat symphony it begins with a grand introduction, prefacing the first movement. The bold timpani rolls and brass signals of this *Adagio* have been likened to a 'clearing of the throat', designed to call a noisy audience to attention lest they miss the much quieter music with which the main *Allegro*, surprisingly, begins. There is a continuing interplay between the noisy full band, topped with trumpets and drums, and more delicate combinations of strings and winds. The mellow effect of flute and clarinets at these points is even more marked due to the noticeable absence of oboes, Mozart's only late symphony to do without this usually essential instrumental colour.

As in many of Haydn's symphonies, and several of Mozart's own earlier works, the slower second movement begins with an almost self-contained piece for the string section alone, simple and affective. When the woodwinds enter (no trumpets and drums in this movement), the mood changes and the music temporarily becomes more driven. In the third movement, a *Menuetto*, the vaulting melody and pulsing accompaniment verge on the athletic. In the central (*Trio*) episode the winds display a more playful side of their character.

Haydn's new 'Paris' symphonies must have reminded Mozart of his own visit to the French capital ten years earlier, for, as the opening gambit of the fourth movement, he revives a joke he had played on the first audience of his own 'Paris' Symphony (No.31). As he explained on that occasion in a letter to his father:

Because I discovered that all the finales here in Paris begin with all the instruments playing together, usually in unison, I started mine with the first and second violins only, piano for the first 8 bars – then immediately forte. The audience, as I expected, said Shh! at the piano, and when the forte came immediately started applauding.

Later, the various returns to the opening violin texture remain an effective way of marking turning points in the movement's structure, brilliant for its obsessive concentration on its opening snatch of melody, that can't be shaken despite the wide-ranging modulations to distant keys. Even then the precise contours of its final cadence come (like its beginning) as something of a surprise!

Symphony No.40 in G minor, K.550

Minor keys are natural phenomena in the music of Beethoven. In Mozart's overwhelmingly sunny output, however, they seem like unseasonal intrusions, requiring some explanation from outside of the composer's usual circumstances. Yet if minor keys signify depression or fatalism, causes are easy enough to find leading up to the Fortieth's completion on 25 July. Not only did *Don Giovanni* flop, but tragically, at the end of June, Mozart's six-month-old daughter, Theresia, died. Perhaps this explains why the G minor symphony's first movement is saturated with Mozart's most unusual and haunting theme. The other three movements are far less familiar to most people, and so can still surprise. After Mozart's death, Haydn quoted a phrase from the luminous second movement in his oratorio *The Seasons*, memorialising his young friend. Since the *Andante* is also the symphony's only major-key movement, the Viennese had by then come to prefer it too. What the Romantics thought of as the high-minded angst of minor keys was all too often an anathema to Viennese audiences, as Beethoven later discovered. But at least they had more staying power than the average audience today. When played with all its repeats, as Mozart intended (but which most conductors do not bother with today), it is almost twice as long as the opening movement. The third movement, a minuet in G minor again, is not a well-balanced, copybook example of the dance. This one is energetic and eventful, with dissonant notes and syncopated rhythms – as unusual, in its small way, as the opening movement. The fourth movement is an orchestral *tour de force*, designed by Mozart to sweep his audience along in a state of increasing nervous excitement. Its inexorable forward motion is interrupted only by the weirdness of a couple of audibly disconcerting moments, when Mozart perversely avoids any clear sense of key for rather longer than is comfortable.

(Note: Mozart produced two versions of this symphony, each with slightly different wind scoring. Daniel Harding conducts the Mahler Chamber Orchestra here in its second version, which included clarinets.)

Symphony No.41 in C major, K.551 'Jupiter'

In concerts in Mozart's day, the first movement of a symphony typically served as the overture to the whole evening's entertainment, so it is hardly surprising that the first movement of his final symphony is stylistically almost identical with his late opera overtures. Moreover, close to the end of the first movement's statement of themes, Mozart actually borrows a phrase from a catchy little opera song, *Un bacio di mano* ('A hand-kiss'), K.541 that he composed a few months earlier. This cheeky snatch of melody, first heard softly from the violins with pizzicato accompaniment, does indeed sound a bit like a hand-kiss, but later attracts more serious attention in the development section. Less subtle, but far more effective, is the contribution of the brass and drums. Taken out of context and played alone, the bluster of their simple, militaristic fanfares sounds more suited to a parade-ground than a concert room (Mozart's usual brass players, drawn from the Emperor's band, had experience in both). Yet, added to the rest of the orchestra, these primitive gestures generate palpable excitement and grandeur. Since his valveless horns and trumpets could only play a few notes in the keys of C and G, Mozart has the woodwinds take over their fanfare figures when he needs to explore more distant keys, as he does, for instance, at the opening of the central development section.

Also suggestive of opera is the aria-like second movement in which the woodwinds (flutes, oboes and bassoons) 'sing' in seemingly effortless counterpoint with muted violins. Mozart's valveless horns were able to participate in this F major movement by changing crooks, but the trumpets and drums are banished until the return of C major in the third movement. This is a fast and breezy minuet, perhaps more suited to the prancing horses of Vienna's Spanish Riding School than to the gracious balls in the Redoutensaal ballroom (for which the Emperor also employed Mozart to compose minuets). Mozart's symphony finales also bear a close resemblance to their operatic finale counterparts, consisting of busy, motoric music inclined to virtuosic sleight-of-hand. This finale is a contrapuntal extravaganza that climaxes in the coda. There, the movement's unforgettable four-note main theme and its no fewer than four counter-melodies are combined simultaneously in what musical technicians describe as 'five-part invertible counterpoint' (which simply means that the five snatches of melody make musical sense together, vertically, whichever one is on top, bottom, or in the middle).

This contrapuntal feat earned for the piece its German nickname, 'Symphony with a fugal ending', which perhaps sounds a little stern for music which, though ingenious and uplifting, is nevertheless couched in the same light-hearted, rollicking manner as Rossini's operatic finales of 15 years later. Among the projects Mozart contemplated for 1789 was a potentially profitable visit to England. Had the visit gone ahead, he would have introduced this symphony to British audiences personally, and heard first-hand the nickname which one of his London admirers (Haydn's friend, John Peter Salomon) gave it, 'Jupiter', fittingly elevating it to the pinnacle of the musical pantheon.

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Franz Schubert: Symphony No.3 in D major, D.200

Adagio maestoso—Allegro con brio

Allegretto

Menuetto (Vivace)—Trio

Presto vivace

1815 was an extraordinary year in the life of young composer Franz Schubert. Seventeen going on eighteen, he was teaching at the local school (of which his father was Principal) and hating it, returning from each dismal day spent belting students to suffer dressings down from his less than proud dad, who was dismissive of his prodigious musical gifts.

Late the previous year he had begun to seek solace and stimulation in a kind of book club run by his older friends devoted to diligent self-improvement via the study of contemporary developments in literature. Franz took the group's work ethic to heart and while he found essays on poetry beyond him, he contributed musical settings instead: Nearly 150 songs in the space of the next twelve months culminating in the mighty Erlkönig. Interspersed, of course, between piano music, string quartets, four musicals, a Mass, several large-scale choral works and the completion of two symphonies. A body of work that many composers would be happy to have achieved in a lifetime was tossed off in a year while holding down a grueling day-job.

His third symphony was written during the summer school break and is often defined by its sunny disposition. The stately, slightly pedagogic slow introduction begins in familiar Haydnesque style before its strange modulations lead us down unexpectedly gloomy corridors to the tonic minor. But light shines through the exit door and it's all joy from then on.

The manuscript shows Schubert thinking hard about how the sprightly main theme should be introduced- on horns or strings? He opted for clarinet and created one of the early 19th century's sweetest orchestral moments, in which you can almost breathe the relief of the young schoolmaster as he skips like a lamb into the holidays.

Other projects rushed into his fevered imagination to divert him, but the rest of the symphony was completed uninterrupted in about a week. An adagio was planned but replaced by a light, ballet-like Allegretto. Then comes an earthy lop-sided Minuet and trio (which sees the oboe and bassoon taking the floor with a charmingly homespun waltz) and a fiery tarantella which brings to mind Beethoven, Rossini and also a future Schubert finale: that of the Great C Major symphony.

It's irrepressible music and while our hindsight may lead us to be a little perturbed by a manic edge to its energy (the fact that 1817 produced almost no work is a telling sign of the kind of devastating troughs that were to follow such peaks), there are next to no hints of the psychic pain that was the fermenting agent of his later masterworks.

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

Symphony No.4 in E-flat major, WAB104 'Romantic' (1878-80 version, Nowak edition)

Bewegt, nicht zu schnell [With movement, not too fast]

Andante quasi allegretto

Scherzo (Bewegt) [With movement] – *Trio (Gemächlich)* [Leisurely]

Finale (Bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell) [With movement, but not too fast]

Bruckner's Fourth Symphony has long been his most popular. This is a puzzle, since there is a grain of truth in the superficial but amusing observation that Bruckner composed, not nine symphonies, but the same symphony nine times! The Fourth is the only symphony to which Bruckner himself gave a title, and 'Romantic' is an apt word for the moods and atmospheres the music evokes. Bruckner went further: when asked to explain his symphony, he invented (after composing it) an imaginary program in which the first movement is supposed to represent a medieval city at dawn, trumpet calls signalling the opening of the city gates, knights riding out into the countryside where they are surrounded by the bird calls and magic of the forest. Bruckner's program is best ignored – this unsophisticated man provided it to oblige well-meaning friends, and the Fourth is no more programmatic than any of his other symphonies. Bruckner once said of a friend's program for the Seventh Symphony, 'If he has to write poetry, why does he have to pick on my symphony?'

'Bruckner reluctantly tried to explain his music because its first audiences found it so hard to understand. They were not helped by Vienna's music critics, particularly the powerful Eduard Hanslick, champion of Brahms and deeply prejudiced against the Wagner disciple, Bruckner. When the Vienna Philharmonic played through the first version of the symphony shortly after Bruckner completed it in late 1874, all except the first movement was pronounced 'idiotic'. The most famous of all Bruckner stories presages the success of the revised Fourth Symphony at its first performance, at a Vienna Philharmonic concert conducted by Hans Richter in February 1881. After a rehearsal, Bruckner gratefully approached Richter and slipped a coin into his hand. 'Take it and drink a beer to my health,' said the delighted composer.

Bruckner's symphonies demanded a new way of listening. He is often tagged 'the Wagnerian symphonist', but his debt to Wagner was very partial: he studied *Tristan und Isolde* from a piano score without text, and when he went to hear *Die Walküre* he is reported to have asked someone after the performance,

'Tell me, why did they burn the woman at the end?' Even the orchestral and harmonic innovations in Bruckner which sound so Wagnerian – the chromatic harmony, the rich brass scoring, the expressive use of the massed strings – are present in embryo in Bruckner's earliest orchestral music, before he became familiar with Wagner. The true sources of the musical craft of this church-trained teacher and organist from Upper Austria lie in that country's musical tradition – in Beethoven and even more in Schubert. Bruckner's symphonies are not dramatic in Wagner's sense, nor dialectical or argumentative in Beethoven's. His inspiration, like Schubert's, is lyrical, and the music is built into long paragraphs, put side by side, and compared by one musician to a series of terraces. 'Schubert,' wrote the great English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey, 'is always ready to help Bruckner whenever Wagner will permit'.

'The spirit of Bruckner hidden behind the 'Wagnerian' sound is entirely different from Wagner's'. As Tovey puts a truth obvious to anyone who knows Bruckner well, he never forgets the high altar of his Catholic church, nor, one might add, the magnificent organ of the Augustinian monastery of St Florian, where he first learnt music. The simple religious devotion of the man can be heard in the developments of the second subject of the *Romantic* Symphony's first movement, and in the magnificent brass chorales which recur in the last movement.

It is often called organists' music, and certainly Bruckner's fondness for contrapuntal devices such as inversion, augmentation and diminution is very obvious in the symphonies, and shows his deep learning in the methods of the old church composers. Bruckner was one of the great improvisers at the organ, but his symphonies, despite their vast scale, are never rambling. His orchestra often sounds like an organ, but as Tovey observes, this is because it is completely free of the mistakes of the organ-loft composer. Bruckner is master of the orchestra.

Perhaps the popularity of Bruckner's Fourth Symphony is chiefly due to its memorable opening. The mysterious beginning of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony fascinated Bruckner, and it has been said that he couldn't get a symphony under way without a tremolo. It is not a symphony which starts, but the beginning of music itself: major and minor horn calls sounding the interval of a fifth, gradually rousing the woodwind to join in. The string tremolos continue, after a climax, as accompaniment to the second subject, and the characteristic 'Bruckner rhythm' of a duplet and a triplet is heard. The recapitulation starts with the opening horn calls,

now surrounded by a flowing figure in muted violins, and they also provide the material of the elaborate coda.

The slow movement is an elegiac march in C minor, the relative minor key. Whereas the slow movement of Beethoven's Ninth, often invoked as Bruckner's model, consists of variations on two themes, the returns of Bruckner's broad main theme are separated by an episode that returns twice, a chant-like theme for the violas heard against pizzicato notes from the other strings. Each statement of the main theme is more richly scored and displays more movement than its predecessor, rising at last to a great climax before a solemn coda.

The last two movements were subject to the revisions and second thoughts so typical of Bruckner's career as a symphonist. Between 1878 and 1880, years after the fiasco of the first read-through, Bruckner wrote a completely new Scherzo, and revised the Finale extensively. The success of the first performance under Richter protected the Fourth Symphony from further major revision by the composer.

Bruckner's description of the Scherzo as a hunt with horn calls, and the Trio as a dance melody played to the hunters during the rest, is the only useful though obvious part of his 'program'. The scale of this sounding of the horn, however, suggests King Mark's moonlight hunt in *Tristan und Isolde*, or even the Ride of the Valkyries, more than Bruckner's bucolic 'hunting of the hare'. The Trio, by contrast, is an Austrian peasant dance with which Haydn, Mozart and of course Schubert would have felt at home.

The Finale is the longest movement, a feature of the overall balance of the symphony again suggested by Beethoven's Ninth. As in Beethoven, there are reminiscences here of the earlier movements. A three-note descending phrase is heard in the introduction, recalling the opening of the symphony, while the brass remember the Scherzo. This phrase is gradually revealed as the main theme, played in unison by the whole orchestra. The second thematic group is dominated by a C minor melody for violins and violas, later combined with a lively woodwind motif. Themes from all the movements occur, combined most artfully with the new thematic material, as Bruckner works his way to a restatement of the symphony's opening theme in the home key. The brass dominates the coda, with the motto of the symphony's first pages.