

Tuesday, July 20, 2010

Chamber Orchestra

Divertimento in D major, K. 251 (1776)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Allegro molto

Menuetto

Andantino

Menuetto (Tema con variazioni)

Rondeau: Allegro assai

Marcia alla francese

Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K. 216 (1775)

Mozart

Allegro

Adagio

Rondo: Allegro

Suite No. 4 in G major, op. 61 “Mozartiana” (1887)

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Gigue: Allegro

Menuet: Moderato

Preghiera (d'après une transcription de F. Liszt): Andante non tanto

Thème et variations: Allegro giusto

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)—*Divertimento in D major*, K. 251 (1776)

People whose knowledge of Mozart's biography is drawn from the 1984 film *Amadeus* would never know that Mozart grew up with a talented older sister named Maria Anna, called “Nannerl” by her family. In fact, during Mozart's earliest “prodigy” tours, his sister got equal billing—but like most young women in the Classical era, Nannerl was prohibited from pursuing musical performance after she reached adolescence, lest she ruin her chances of making a good marriage (since no respectable young woman would “display” herself publicly). Although her brother encouraged her to keep composing, no music by Nannerl survives—but there are pieces that Mozart wrote *for* her, and it is possible that the *Divertimento in D*, K. 251, is one of those works. It dates from July 1776, when both the siblings were still living in Salzburg. Nannerl's name-day was July 25, and her birthday was July 30; the divertimento might have been intended for either of those occasions.

Whatever inspired the divertimento's composition, it is an especially buoyant septet, requiring an oboe, two horns, two violins, a viola, and a string bass. The title “divertimento” indicates that it was meant to be entertaining, and its instrumentation would be suitable for both indoors *and* outside performance—either of which might have suited an Austrian (or California!) summer evening. Despite its sheer entertainment value, Mozart did incorporate various artistic touches: the solo oboe plays a poignant melody during the “Andantino,” and the second “Menuetto” is no simple dance tune: instead, it launches a set of three variations, first for oboe, then violin I, and finally violin II.

Mozart—*Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K. 216 (1775)*

Mozart was all of seventeen years old when he wrote his first violin concerto in 1773. Mozart was only nineteen when he wrote his *second* violin concerto—and he was *still* nineteen when he wrote his third, fourth, and fifth violin concertos. In fact, four of his five violin concertos come from a seven-month stretch of 1775—but there is a dramatic shift in quality that took place after the first two concertos; the *Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K. 216*, seems decades more advanced than the two earlier, almost pedestrian works. It is impossible to know what triggered this dramatic elevation in Mozart’s achievement, but many historians simply shrug their shoulders; clearly, Mozart found his “voice.” But then, after two more pieces in that genre, he seems to have said all that he wanted to say, and his short burst of violin concertos came to an end.

Violin Concerto No. 3, dating from September 12, 1775, is a very popular concerto, with good reason. The opening is full of authority—but those who know Mozart’s works very well will recognize that Mozart has done a bit of musical “recycling” during this orchestral ritornello. It is the same energetic ritornello that he used to launch one of the arias in *Il re pastore*, an opera he had written about six months earlier. Maybe that operatic mood affected the melody he wrote for the concerto’s slow movement, for it is a luscious, fluid tune that allows the violin to “sing” beautifully. The finale is more of a romp, however, partly because of Mozart’s inclusion of a folk tune.

Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)—*Suite No. 4 in G major, op. 61 “Mozartiana” (1887)*

We have to wonder if future historians will learn as much about today’s composers from their online blogs and Facebook musings as scholars have gleaned about past composers who kept private journals. In any event, we have a small window into Tchaikovsky’s compositional process when reading his diary entry of May 17, 1884. He wrote, “Played Mozart and was in ecstasy. An idea about a suite from Mozart.” Three years later, when the musical world was celebrating the 1887 centennial of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, Tchaikovsky confided in his diary once again: “Mozart is the highest, the culminating point that *beauty* has attained in the sphere of music. No one has made me weep, has made me tremble with rapture, from the consciousness of my nearness to *that something* which we call the *ideal*, as he has done.” Earlier that year, Tchaikovsky had at last taken four works by Mozart and arranged them for orchestra; the result was his *Suite No. 4*, op. 61, which he called *Mozartiana*.

Mozartiana made its debut in Moscow on November 26, 1887, and Tchaikovsky was thrilled by its reception, saying, “Never have I encountered such enthusiasm or had such a triumph.” Since Tchaikovsky had attained the status of a Russian hero by that time, this was no small accolade. Admittedly, the arrangements were very “Tchaikovskian” in flavor, which might have added to their popularity. However, all of the Mozartian works that served as the inspirations—the *Gigue*, K. 574, the *Minuet*, K. 355, the *Ave verum corpus*, K. 618, and the *Variations*, K. 455—have charm and eloquence of their own.