

JULY 23—MOZART AT THE MISSION

Thursday, July 23, 2009, 8 PM
Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa

Symphony No. 18 in F Major, K. 130 (1772)

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756–1791)

Horn players love Mozart, and with good reason: when Mozart was only nine years old, writing his first symphony, he asked his sister Nannerl to remind him to give the horn “something worthwhile to do.” By 1772, in his *Symphony in F Major, K. 130*, he continued to keep the horns busy: here he called for four horns for the very first time. (He was inspired midway through writing the symphony, and so he went back to the beginning and squeezed in two more parts to supplement the two horns he’d already incorporated.) Moreover, many writers regard this as the first of Mozart’s “great” symphonies, not just because of his skillful use of the horns, but due to his sophisticated treatment of all the instruments.

Mozart varies his techniques throughout the symphony, calling for Scotch snaps (sprightly short-long rhythms) in the first movement, then mixing and matching tone colors in the “Andante grazioso.” The violins, for instance, mute their strings, whereas the violas do not, and at the same time the cellos and basses pluck their instruments in the technique called pizzicato. Mozart shows off his contrapuntal skill in the minuet by writing a canon for the basses and violins (while the horns sail to the top of their range in the Trio), and the symphony concludes with a noisy, brilliant finale, filled with abrupt changes of volume and intensity. The symphony also proves that Mozart did change his mind quite often; the score is filled with erased and altered passages—but certainly his legendary craftsmanship wins through. Not bad for a composer who was all of 16 years old!

Violin Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Major, K. 207 (1773)

MOZART

Mozart’s sad demise, as he struggled for recognition in a Vienna that seemed almost willfully resistant to recognizing his genius, often makes us forget the advantages he enjoyed as a child. His family was extremely musical: his older sister, Nannerl, was also celebrated as a prodigy right alongside Mozart during their family tours, and their father Leopold was not only a respected composer but also the author of an important method book for violin-playing. Similarly, we forget that young Mozart was a keyboard prodigy as well as a fine violinist, so when he composed violin concertos, he was able to perform them himself—which he did on several occasions, just as he did with his later keyboard concertos.

The first of Mozart’s five violin concertos was long thought to date from the same prolific year—1775—that produced the next four. However, it appears that the date on the manuscript was altered by some later hand, and scholars now believe the *Violin Concerto No. 1 in B-flat, K. 207*, was completed in 1773 (when Mozart was 17). This earlier dating is quite plausible, for Mozart seems to have approached the concerto very earnestly, rather differently than the way he handled his subsequent works. For one thing, all three of this first concerto’s movements use the somewhat “learned” structure called sonata form. He also employs a wide variety of special techniques, as if to demonstrate his breadth as a performer. Regardless of the actual date of composition, this first concerto is an impressive compendium of Mozart’s capabilities.

***Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K. 543* (1788)**

MOZART

For mystery novel fans, Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is a frustrating work, for Dickens died with the story unfinished. Although Mozart did complete his *Symphony No. 39 in E-flat, K. 543*, some three years before his death, this symphony is also a frustrating work: we don't know why he wrote it. Modern listeners might suppose that Mozart composed it out of pure inspiration, but this is a romanticized view of artistic freedom that really belongs to the next generation of composers, such as Beethoven. Mozart was extremely pragmatic; with a wife and children to support, nearly everything he wrote had a planned performance or was designed for publication, since he couldn't afford the time to indulge himself with compositions that had no clear-cut purpose. But we just don't know why he devoted much of the summer of 1788 to his last three symphonies (Nos. 39, 40 and 41), for no subsequent performances have come to light. Lots of theories abound: that Mozart planned to give a series of concerts featuring the works, or that he would take them to England for a concert tour. Sadly, though, there's no evidence that Mozart ever heard these symphonies played in his lifetime.

Symphony No. 39 is an intriguing work, for its emphasis on the number 3 (the "triple" chords at the start and so forth) suggests that it may have Masonic associations. Other highlights include the conversational "dialogue" during the "Andante," and a cheery "oom-pah" trio is tucked away in the middle of the graceful minuet. It is hard to resist toe-tapping during the exuberant finale—making its sudden pauses all the more amusing.

Copyright © 2009 by Dr. Alyson McLamore