

Program Notes by Don Adkins

Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551 (1788)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)

One of the greatest demonstrations of musical creativity over a short span of time took place during the summer of 1788, when Mozart wrote his last three symphonies in six weeks. The last of the three, Symphony No. 41, was written in just 16 days. Many of Mozart's biographers have made a point of describing his life at this time as miserable: embarrassing letters to friends asking for money, a public that no longer supported his music, a move to less than satisfactory lodgings in the suburbs of Vienna, the death of a young child and the serious illness of his wife. This period, according to many writers, is the beginning of Mozart's long slide into a "pauper's grave" which is a misunderstanding of the actual situation. Along with these tribulations comes the mystery of why he wrote three symphonies, two of which (Nos. 39 and 41) were probably not performed during his lifetime. A look at the facts can clear up these misconceptions.

Mozart did lose a child to illness in June and his wife was quite ill. As to his career, he was not suffering any more than others in Vienna. Austria was at war with the Turks and was experiencing a depressed economy that affected everyone, including the aristocracy. Performance groups were being disbanded, concerts canceled and commissions to composers withheld. Every musician, not only Mozart, was being performed less often because fewer concerts were taking place. As soon as the economy improved, the number of commissions increased significantly, and by 1791 Mozart's music was receiving just as many performances as ever. Antonio Salieri included Symphony No. 40, the version with clarinets, in a pair of concerts he gave in April of 1791 to benefit widows and orphans. Manuscripts of Mozart reworking the woodwind parts for this symphony come from this time period. It is not known whether or not Mozart heard the performances.

At the time, many families were scaling back households, selling horses, dismissing servants and doing everything possible to economize. Mozart moved his family from rather expensive lodgings in Vienna to a quieter place in the suburbs with a lower rent. He looked forward to this move because he now found himself with free time and wanted a quieter place to complete several projects for the coming concert season. His anticipation of a set of subscription concerts at the Casino during the fall of 1788 was his reason for creating his last three symphonies. He even printed tickets for the concerts and sent two free tickets to his friend and financial supporter Michael Puchberg. The concerts never took place because the usual subscription audience, the upper class and the aristocracy, were no longer in a financial position to afford the usual luxuries or had moved out of Vienna to avoid the

tribulations of the war. His letters requesting loans of money from Puchberg, often interpreted as desperate requests, were written to a friend who regularly loaned reasonable amounts to many people. Puchberg was fully confident that Mozart would be able to repay the loan in a few months.

The music written by Mozart not only was the art music of his day, it was also popular with the middle class. His symphonies were designed to appeal to the audience member who was not necessarily a trained musician. He combined ideas that were new and innovative along with elements common to all composers of his time. The first movement of No. 41 uses a melody Mozart borrowed from an aria he had written in May 1788, *Un bacio di mano*, as an insertion into the opera *Le gelosie fortunate* by Pasquale Anfossi. The principal melody of the second movement begins with a basic melodic shape used by Gluck, Haydn, and later Beethoven. Mozart himself used it in several works, such as the Piano Concerto in D Minor, *Don Giovanni* and Symphony No. 39. The last movement, considered to be the most significant symphonic creation of the 18th century, utilizes a 4-note phrase that can be traced back to early Jewish melodies and Gregorian chant. Haydn uses the same 4-note melody in the key of D major in the last movement of his Symphony No. 1.

The origins of the subtitle "Jupiter" have been found in the travel diaries of the London publisher Vincent Novello. Novello visited Mozart's widow in Salzburg in 1829 and wrote in his diary the following day: "Mozart's son said he considered the Finale to his father's Sinfonia in C – which Salomon christened the Jupiter – to be the highest triumph of instrumental composition, and I agree with him." It appears that Johann Peter Salomon, the musician responsible for bringing Haydn to London to compose his last twelve symphonies, also left his mark on Mozart's last symphony.

It is interesting that the four-note theme of the last movement, C-D-F-E, is later found in Brahms' choice of keys for his four symphonies, C minor-D major-F major-E minor; and by Schumann's choice of keys for his four symphonies a whole-step lower, B flat major-C major-E flat major-D minor. Both composers greatly admired this symphony and, consciously or not, paid both it and Mozart tribute in their symphonic efforts. The movement where this theme appears is often quoted as the most remarkable example of the fugue ever written. Although the contrapuntal writing is unique and extraordinary, a full-blown fugue never actually appears. The excitement generated by this complex and energetic finale leaves no doubt in the listener that this was Mozart's ultimate symphonic statement.