

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola, and Orchestra K. 364 (1779)

As one of the most prolific and versatile composers of all time, Mozart's legendary status remains unassailable. He died at the age of 35 and yet in the space of half of a normal lifetime he produced more than most mortals could ever hope to produce in a hundred lifetimes. His voluminous output includes some six hundred works in which he demonstrated complete mastery of virtually every musical genre of his day including symphonies, operas, chamber music, sonatas, and concertos. The *Sinfonia Concertante*, which is in essence a crossover work between a double concerto for violin and viola and a symphony, was written when he was only 23 but it came at significant point in his musical evolution while trying to escape from the clutches of his birth town of Salzburg.

Little is known about what prompted Mozart to write the work. When he was 19 he had written five violin concertos, the last three of which make frequent appearances in the concert hall to this day. He was not only a virtuoso pianist but also an accomplished violinist. Yet as he grew older he became more interested the darker tones of the viola and it's thought likely he wrote the viola part of the *Sinfonia* for himself. Indeed, he later played viola in string quartets with Joseph Haydn and composed six quintets supplementing the normal string quartet with an extra viola. In the *Sinfonia* he also divides the violas into two sections, often accompanying the solo viola with just the violas in the orchestra.

Another clue to the provenance of this work is that it came soon after one of the most traumatic periods of his life. The previous year he had toured Europe with his mother in a fruitless pursuit for employment away from Salzburg. In Munich he fell in love with a gifted singer, Aloysia Weber, the second of four daughters in a musical family, and while initially his interest had been reciprocated, on his return she rebuffed him. As if that weren't bad enough while in Paris his mother abruptly and unexpectedly died. Around this time Mozart composed his Piano Sonata No. 8 in A minor, the first sonata he had written in a minor key and a work, uncharacteristically for Mozart, imbued with darkness. It's not known for certain whether Mozart wrote the sonata before or after his mother's death but it seems tempting to attribute its character to the unfortunate events of that time. Once back home, Mozart took a new commission as concertmaster and organist for the Archbishop of Salzburg but it was not a role that brought him joy. The *Sinfonia* thus emerged at a time when the composer had seen many of his hopes thwarted and falsified. Yet what an astonishingly confident work it is. Scored for strings supported only by oboes and horns, the work offers, as described by one essayist a "sonorous variety of string tone unparalleled in Mozart's music and indeed is scarcely surpassed by any other work of the eighteenth century".

The very opening of the work begins with bold statement by the whole orchestra in the tonic key of E flat followed by a longish introduction of thematic ideas until the surprise entry of the violin

and viola soloists playing in unison octaves. Thereafter the first movement bears witness to the two soloists responding alternately as in a dialogue and at other times joining forces often building to climactic statements including in the final cadenza before yielding again to the orchestra. It's in the pathos of the second movement, however, that we hear the anguish in Mozart's psyche coming to the fore. Cast in the melancholy but tonically related key of C minor, the movement's depth of expression foreshadows the tragic quality of some of his later works including notably the slow movement of the famous viola quintet in G minor. It's in the Sinfonia's slow movement that Salieri's famous line from Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*, that formed the basis of the Oscar winning movie of the same name, springs to mind: "Displace one note and there would be diminishment," Salieri jealously observes. But Mozart was never one to allow his music to wallow in despair. The last movement of the Sinfonia is in complete contrast to the slow movement, so much so that its semi-comical jauntiness sounds at first almost jarring but it leads to a rousing and satisfying conclusion to this magnificent work.

Franz Liszt: Les Préludes(1844 - 1854)

Inspired by seeing a performance by the virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini, the young Liszt decided that he wanted to achieve something similar on the piano. He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams becoming the foremost virtuoso pianist of his day, and the closest equivalent in those days to being a rock star. Audiences became so frenzied with excitement at seeing his performances that the expression Lisztomania was coined to describe the phenomenon, more than a hundred years before the more modern craze of the similarly named Beatlemania. Women would seek opportunities to get a lock of Liszt's hair, seize piano strings that he had broken in the course of his performances, and in one instance one fan went so far as to retrieve the butt of a cigar he thrown in the gutter to keep as a much prized trophy. Plus ça change ... And yet despite this wild success, Liszt suddenly stopped touring as a concert pianist while still at the height of his powers at the age of 35 and accepted a position as court music director at Weimar where he refocused his energies on composition.

As a leading representative of what became known as the "New German School" that also enlisted the powerful if imperious voice of Richard Wagner, Liszt promoted the idea of programmatic music, most notably in the idea of a symphonic poem, a kind of one movement work that bears a relationship to a literary or visual work, a genre that later reached its peak in the hands of Richard Strauss. *Also Sprach Zarathustra* anyone? Liszt wrote 13 symphonic poems of which Les Préludes is the best known. The work grew out of a chance encounter Liszt had with a French poet, Joseph Autran, at a banquet held in the composer's honor. Liszt set four of Autran's poems to music for piano and chorus, and then followed up by writing an overture to precede these pieces. None of these works were published but several years later Liszt decided to revise the overture as a symphonic poem. While doing so Liszt discovered a different poem, "Les Préludes", by a more famous French writer, Alphonse de Lamartine, that offered a unifying vision depicting life as a sequence of struggles between epic forces. Retrofitting this bigger narrative onto his music, Liszt adopted the poem's name for his work and prefaced his score

with his own prose interpretation: "What else is life but a series of preludes to that unknown song, of which the first, solemn note is announced by death?," he asks. Some critics pounced on this literary sleight of hand as undermining the whole idea of programmaticism: if the music had been inspired by another work how much meaning can we truly associate with the substituted text?

The music makes a compelling case for itself regardless. After a short brooding introduction in which a three note motif is allowed to mutate and evolve, we are led into a sequence of musical episodes that variously explore the heroic, the tempestuous, and the pastoral, until exploding into a final blast of bombast that the Nazis saw fit to exploit in their propaganda during the second world war. For that Liszt is blameless. Moral of the story? Even bad guys can like good music? No - Liszt's message was surely something deeper about the human spirit.

Antonin Dvořák: Symphony No 8 in G major Op. 88 (1889)

The last three symphonies 7, 8, and 9 are considered to be among Dvořák's greatest achievements. The ninth a.k.a "From The New World" tends to hog the limelight which is a pity as the other symphonies offer refreshing alternatives to his most famous work. In his eighth symphony, Dvořák said that he had wanted to do something different from his previous symphonies. In the first movement, for example, he breaks free from the usual strictures of symphonic form where one carefully delineates first subject, second subject, development, and recapitulation. Instead, melodies come and go in a more rhapsodic style. Johannes Brahms, who had championed Dvořák's music from his early days wrote after the symphony's publication: "Too much that's fragmentary and incidental loiters about in the piece. Everything is fine, musically captivating, and beautiful – but no main points! Especially in the first movement, the result is not proper. But a charming musician!"

Nowadays, of course, people are not so concerned about the niceties of conforming to a particular symphonic template and Dvořák more than makes up for any violations of convention by giving us some rewardingly rich melodic material all with a Czech flavor including the expressive opening melody in G minor played by the cellos, horns, bassoons, and clarinets. This theme, which reappears in the trumpets during a turbulent development section, immediately sets the work in tension with its overall key of G major. Though new themes in G major soon appear - a bird-like flute entry introduces the main theme - the movement later vacillates between major and minor until the coda when we emphatically return to G major.

For a symphony that is often described as sunny and optimistic, the slow second movement is certainly not without drama. The brooding and mysterious opening section eventually leads to the main theme in C major which sounds cheerful enough. However, after a brief violin solo there comes a huge climax that after dissolving into the void is followed by a stormy transitional passage that seems destined to take us somewhere entirely different. Eventually, though, order is restored, the main theme returns and the movement disappears serenely into the sunset.

The third movement, which would normally be the place for a brisk scherzo, offers instead a slow Slavonic waltz in G minor that sandwiches a contrasting trio section in G major. The charming tune of the trio is reused in a new guise in the coda quickly propelling the movement to an end. The final movement of this symphony begins with a trumpet fanfare which is followed by a beautiful cello theme closely akin to one of the themes from the first movement. The rest of the movement is in the form of a set of G major variations on this theme perhaps inspired by the example Brahms had set in his symphony No 4, completed a few years earlier, in which his last movement is in the baroque form of a passacaglia, also a sequence of variations. The work finishes after a slow beautiful variation with a wonderfully rousing coda.

Dvořák was affronted when his regular publisher, Fritz Simrock, offered one third for this symphony compared with the seventh, and encouraged Dvořák instead to write shorter pieces that would generate more revenue. Dvořák promptly turned to the London publisher Novello, who offered three times as much saying he was flattered to get the composer's business. Dvorak was not so much interested in the money, though, as having his most accomplished works taken seriously. Simrock probably regretted his mistake.