

Program Notes

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Let's begin by saying that Salieri had nothing to do with Mozart's death. He was in no way a villain. In his later years, he became the grand old man of music in Vienna, and his many composition students included Beethoven, Schubert, and Mozart's son.

At the end of this life, Mozart and his wife Constanze were in desperate circumstances due partly to the whims of the volatile Viennese aristocracy, but also in part due to Mozart's inability to manage his finances. Even in relatively prosperous times when The Marriage of Figaro and Don Giovanni were produced, the Mozarts were constantly in debt. The fact that Constanze was a disorganized housewife did nothing to help. After Mozart's death, she overcame this handicap and became a shrewd businesswoman. In contrast to his inability to compete successfully in the everyday world, Mozart was possibly the most gifted musician that ever lived.

It was his father, Leopold, who first recognized his son's genius. A composer of modest gifts, a competent conductor, and the author of a widely acclaimed violin method, he abandoned the furtherance of his own career and devoted himself to the development of his son's abilities. It can be safely assumed that without Leopold's nurturing, Wolfgang would not have achieved the greatness that he did.

The admiration of Mozart's spectacular abilities is almost universal among his fellow composers. Franz Joseph Haydn, speaking to Leopold, said: "Before God and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me..." Richard Wagner: "Is it possible to find anything more perfect than every piece of his Don Giovanni?" Charles Gounod: "He added the profound and penetrating influence of truth of expression combined with perfect beauty." Camille Saint-Saëns: "Give Mozart a fairy tale and he creates without effort an immortal masterpiece." Edvard Grieg: "...He creates like a god, without pain." Gustav Holst: "Mozart remains the greatest prodigy in musical history."

Contrary opinion? Hector Berlioz, although praising much of Mozart, said of a passage in Don Giovanni: "Mozart has committed one of the most flagrant crimes recorded in the history of art against passion, feeling, good taste, and good sense."

String Quartet in D (Hoffmeister), K.499 (1786)

Four years before writing this quartet, Mozart described his daily routine in a letter he wrote to his sister. He arose at six and was at his desk by seven. He composed until nine or ten and then gave lessons until one o'clock. "Then I have lunch, unless I am invited to some house where they lunch at two or even three o'clock... I can never work before five or six o'clock in the evening, and even then I am often prevented by a concert. If I am not prevented, I compose until nine. I often go on writing until one—and up again at six... I rush to my desk with the greatest eagerness and remain seated with the greatest delight." His wife believed that he "killed himself through overexertion... He frequently sat up composing until two and rose at four, an exertion that assisted in destroying him." She may be right. This may be the explanation of why so young a person was unable to overcome his fatal illness. There are 626 K. numbers. Many of these are long works, and nearly all are among our greatest musical treasures.

K.499 comes directly after the famous group of "Haydn" quartets. It is a "loner"—not part of a group of works. It comes in a period of Mozart's life in which his financial situation was

changed. He had finished a run of three or four years as a concert promoter—a position that paid him good dividends. That was now over, and he found himself at the mercy of patrons, publishers and promoters who paid the fees that took care of his bills. One outcome was this quartet. It was commissioned by the publisher Hoffmeister—hence its nickname.

The first movement, *allegretto*, starts with a melodic D major chord played by all four instruments in octaves. After four measures comes harmonic treatment. There are several antiphonal passages—the two violins being answered by the viola and cello. Sonata form is used. It is noteworthy that the two halves of the movement—exposition, followed by development and recapitulation—are each repeated separately. This practice shows clearly how this form is an expansion of the two-part form as seen, for example, in the Bach suites. A minuet follows in the tonic key. The trio is in the tonic minor. There are some interesting *stretto* patterns between the two violins. The third movement is an *adagio* in the subdominant key. The melodic line is ornate, and there is an impassioned climax. There is frequent pairing of the violins against the two lower instruments. It should be pointed out that the switching of the positions of the two middle movements is not a mere whim. With an intense slow movement such as we have here, the emotional weight of the whole quartet shifts from the first half to the second half. The last movement is again in D major. It uses the sonata form with both halves repeated as in the first movement. It starts with normal four-measure phrases, except that measure four is silence. This occurs twice at the beginning, in several places during the course of the movement and finally in the coda.

Charles Rosen, the eminent pianist and musicologist, describes this quartet as “beautiful and completely personal.”

- Hoyle Carpenter

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

Violin Sonata in B minor, P 110 (1917)

The 20th-century Italian composer Ottorino Respighi wrote numerous works that transformed the past. Eighth and ninth century musical forms form the cornerstone of his ever-popular Roman Trilogy (“Pines of Rome,” “Fountains of Rome,” “Roman Festivals”), and his equally popular “Ancient Airs and Dances” draws upon 16th-century lute music. A master of orchestration, Respighi’s music shows a strong inclination toward impressionism while being rooted in the Romantic manner.

Composed in 1917, the Violin Sonata in B minor was written shortly after the acclaimed premiere of his “Fountains of Rome,” the piece that catapulted him into the international spotlight as a composer. It is written in a conventional three-movement form, each movement surging forward with a heightening sense of drama created by rising passages and swelling dynamics. While there is little here that sounds anything like his Roman Trilogy, Respighi’s interest in works and forms of earlier composers is nevertheless evident. The theme of the sonata’s final movement, for instance, was inspired by the last movement of Brahms’ fourth symphony, and is based on the ancient form of the *Passacaglia*.

Indeed, the sonata is quite Brahmsian in overall flavor. The first movement, marked *Moderato*, begins with an arching violin theme over a brooding accompaniment that immediately announces the sonata as a work of intensity and seriousness. The second theme, sweeter and simpler with a characteristic fall at the end of each phrase, has a hint of Brahms, but colored with more impressionistic harmonies. A hint of the spacious impressionism of Respighi’s orchestral

writing can be heard in the wide-ranging piano theme that opens the Andante espressivo, the emotional heart of the work.

- Steve Siegel

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quintet in G Major for Two Violins, Viola, Cello and Double Bass, Op. 77 (B.49) (1875)

Dvořák was Czech, born in the region known as Bohemia. While most composers come from sturdy, middle-class stock, the Dvořáks were definitely peasants. Father Dvořák was a butcher whose ambition was to become the master of a village pub.

Gervaise Hughes, in his book on Dvořák, makes an interesting comparison between Dvořák and Verdi. They were contemporaries (Verdi 1813-1901). Both were "industrious, shrewd with the canniness of a peasant." They were good hearted, modest and gruff in manner. Theologically, they were opposites. Dvořák was a devout Catholic. Verdi was agnostic. "For Dvořák, music was the raison d'être to precisely the same extent as it was for Verdi; while being far and away the most compelling interest in life it was not the only one. Verdi's nationalistic outlook encouraged him to take part in politics, and during his late forties and early fifties, he was actually a member of parliament. Dvořák, although equally devoted to his homeland, found relaxation in watching trains and breeding pigeons; had he lived beyond the age of sixty-two, he might have become a regular contributor to popular journals such as The Railway Magazine and The Racing Pigeon."

This work was composed as Opus 18 in 1875. The publisher, Simrock issued it as Opus 77. We have here one instance of the considerable confusion that existed about Dvořák's works. The well-known New World Symphony, for example, formerly number five, is now number nine. The editor of Dvořák's complete works (now in progress) is working his way through this maze and assigning a number to each work. This quintet is B (Burghauser) 49.

It is in this work that Dvořák first speaks with a clear personal idiom and establishes his identity as a composer. His music is full of rhythmic variety and sparkling melodic invention.

The first movement is in sonata form with a terse, rhythmic first theme. The second theme suggests a graceful canter. Originally, there was a slow movement next, an Andante Religioso that was deleted and used in a later work. Then follows a scherzo that uses an ABA pattern. The following movement is also an ABA structure. The A theme is broad and flowing. One romantically inclined critic has described its middle section as "one flowing stream of passionate warmth, depth of feeling, and powerfully affecting range of mood." The last movement, a rondo on two themes, is a gay, carefree piece.

- Hoyle Carpenter