NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2019

Xian Conducts Mozart

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Walton: Suite No. 2 from *Façade*

Scandal! Satire! Nose-thumbing!—and raucous fun. From the opening fanfare, Walton's suite is an irreverent romp, mocking everything from Scottish reels to 1920s popular song.

Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 23

Mozart distills his style to pristine perfection in this concerto. For its gentle strains, he used clarinet instead of the more piquant oboes, forgoing timpani and brass. The result is intimate and tender, absent of the military flourishes in the larger-scale concertos. The soloist dazzles with brilliant passagework in the outer movements, with poignant tragedy in between.

Mozart: Symphony No. 40

Nineteenth-century musicians cited this work as "proof" that Mozart was a true romantic, seething with the passion and angst of the next generations. Though 18th-century balance and elegance remain in this music, a dark undercurrent courses through the symphony. Transcendent woodwind writing elevates Mozart's Andante to the sublime.

WALTON: Suite No. 2 from *Façade*

WILLIAM WALTON

Born: March 29, 1902, in Oldham, Lancashire, England

Died: March 8, 1983, in Ischia, Italy

Composed: 1938

World Premiere: March 30, 1938, in New York. Sir John Barbirolli led the New York Philharmonic.

NJSO Premiere: 1954–55 season. Samuel Antek conducted.

Duration: 10 minutes

William Walton described himself as a romantic with a strong preference for classical structures. Both his parents were musicians: his father a choirmaster, his mother a singer. Walton earned a scholarship to sing in Oxford's Christ Church Cathedral at age 10, studying piano and violin at the Cathedral school for the next six years. He began composing as a boy, eventually pursuing a degree in music at Oxford.

He first achieved notoriety with *Façade* (1921), an "Entertainment with Poems by Edith Sitwell" for two speakers and chamber ensemble that created a *succès de scandale.* Eventually Walton established a more dignified reputation as the foremost British composer of his generation, but *Façade* put him on the map.

He revised the work throughout the 1920s and extracted an orchestral suite in 1926. This second suite followed in 1938, with assistance in orchestration from Constant Lambert. Even without Sitwell's sassy, irreverent poetry, the music captures the devil-may-care atmosphere of the original: a young composer thumbing his nose at tradition and propriety, just having fun.

Instrumentation: piccolo, flute, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, trombone, side drum, suspended cymbal, castanets, triangle, temple blocks, bass drum and strings.

MOZART: Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1784 and early 1786; completed on March 2.

World Premiere: March 1786 in Vienna.

NJSO Premiere: 1990–91 season. Emanuel Ax was the soloist; Hugh Wolff conducted.

Duration: 26 minutes

Mozart reserved the key of A major for special works. His compositions in A reflect tranquility, clarity of spirit and a measure of intimacy that are rarely present in other tonalities. Both of Mozart's A-major piano concertos (K. 414 and K. 488) are exquisite jewels with an immediate melodic appeal that does not preclude emotional weight. This later concerto holds a special place in the Mozart canon, more fully realizing the tenderness, pathos and sparkle hinted at so generously in the earlier work.

As a performing artist in the Vienna of the 1780s, Mozart was famed for his brilliant improvisations. In his piano concertos, he left us a tantalizing glimpse of his improvisatory style in the surviving cadenzas. These cadenzas present a paradox: Mozart generally committed them to manuscript paper only when they were intended for someone else. When performing concertos in public, he relied on his own inexhaustible invention, creating the cadenzas spontaneously. Thus, those cadenzas produced for his students are the best surviving evidence we have of his imaginative, freer playing. They submit readily to the interpretive keyboard gifts of other pianists. The first-movement cadenza is Mozart's sole surviving cadenza for any of the dozen concertos he composed between 1784 and 1786. It is played by virtually all pianists who perform this work.

Many writers have noted the increasing importance of opera in Mozart's instrumental works during the 1780s. His dancing bassoon lines in the concerto's zesty finale look forward to the irresistible shenanigans brought to such masterly perfection in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Even more striking is the

emotional intensity of the slow movement. H.C. Robbins Landon has drawn a parallel between the Adagio and the affective arias of Mozart's opera seria heroines; there is a prescient relationship between this music and that of Pamina in *The Magic Flute* as well.

Once again, tonality plays an important role: this Adagio is the only instance in all of Mozart of a movement in the dark key of F-sharp minor, the relative minor of A major. Musicologist and pianist Charles Rosen singles out the slow movement as an astonishingly poignant expression of grief and despair, referring to its "passionate melancholy." Mozart achieves this by the simplest of means; no virtuoso figuration interferes with the tragic intimacy of this lovely Adagio in slow siciliana rhythm.

Despite the jollity and brilliance of the ensuing rondo-finale, our memory of the slow movement is never fully erased. Mozart gives us a powerful reminder of it in a thrilling F-sharp Minor episode. He concludes the concerto with brilliant figuration in an exuberant style, but that echo of wistfulness still hangs in the air.

Instrumentation: two clarinets, two bassoons, strings and solo piano.

MOZART: Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
Composed: Summer 1788; completed July 25, 1788.
World Premiere: Undocumented, but possibly in Vienna in 1790 or 1791
NJSO Premiere: 1926–27 season. Philip James conducted.
Duration: 35 minutes

Few works in the classical symphonic literature are more beloved than Mozart's great G-minor symphony. How ironic that the music should be so familiar, while we have so little information about the circumstances of its composition! We know that Mozart composed his final trilogy of symphonies: No. 39 in E flat, K. 543f; this one, and No. 41 in C, K.551 ("Jupiter") in a mere six weeks in 1788. Such a

combination of quantity and superior quality is almost unparalleled in music history. But *why* did he compose them? There is no mention of any of the three symphonies in Mozart's letters to give us a clue as to their origin. One theory holds that Mozart was planning to present these works at a series of subscription concerts, but no such series came to fruition that year. More recently, scholars have hypothesized that a performance of the three final symphonies may have taken place in 1790.

If the Viennese public heard the G-minor symphony, they must have been baffled. Works in minor keys were unusual in the late 18th century, and Mozart's symphony is singularly dark throughout its four movements. The nervous agitation that opens K. 550 was a radical departure from the norm. Accompaniment momentarily supersedes melody, and when we hear the first theme it is *piano*. These observations may seem parenthetical to us, but they were bold departures for Mozart. Audiences today hear this symphony as balanced and refined. To late 18th-century ears, the music would have been deeply disturbing. Nineteenth-century romantics seized on the G-minor symphony as evidence that Mozart was the harbinger of musical romanticism.

Mozart expands the emotional boundaries of the classical symphony in this work by his very expressive, intensely personal musical language. Particularly lovely is the lengthy slow movement, which explores nuances of the delicate wind scoring and the persuasive pull of subtly irregular rhythmic patterns. Though in E-flat major, this Andante is hardly a respite from the tragic overtones of G minor. Chromatic lines in the woodwinds remind us of the broad emotional paintbrushes Mozart used. The finale is harmonically adventurous and as dramatic as anything Beethoven composed. Daring extremes of dynamics and high emotional charge argue persuasively for categorizing K. 550 with the early Romantics. At the same time, the symphony's perfection of form and elegant proportions are a constant reminder that in Mozart, the classical era reached its pinnacle.

Instrumentation: flute; oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns in pairs; and strings.

MOZART IN MINOR KEYS

Tradition holds that Haydn composed 104 symphonies, Mozart wrote 41 and Beethoven stopped at nine. Actually, two additional symphonies have been authenticated as Haydn's compositions, and Mozart's symphonic output numbers somewhere between 55 and 65. (The additional Mozart pieces are primarily juvenilia; then again, even as a boy, Mozart wrote orchestral music of astoundingly high quality.)

Now look at the balance between major and minor keys among these classical symphonies. Of Beethoven's nine, two are in minor keys (the Fifth and the Ninth) and both end resolutely in major mode. Among Haydn's 106, 11, or approximately 10%, are in minor mode. With Mozart, the percentage is even lower. Only two of 41 symphonies are in minor, and both are in G minor.

Is this significant? Musicians and scholars have long thought so. By the late Baroque era, certain tonalities had specific associations in music that held throughout the 18th century. C major was the Viennese key of sunlight. D major was commonly employed for ceremonial music. F major was associated with pastoral themes. E-flat major was a key of nobility and high ideals. G major was a key designating cheerfulness. These categories were not ironclad, and to some extent listening to 18th-century works in specific keys prompts a chicken-and-egg question. Which came first, music that communicates certain characteristics, or the expectation of such music in specific keys? One fact brooks no debate: music in minor mode was unusual in the last quarter of the 18th century. As it happens, those years coincided with Mozart's full maturity. The taste of the day favored music in major keys.

Mozart was a consolidator of style, not an innovator. The dominance of major mode in his music is not limited to his symphonies. Among his dozens of serenades, cassations and divertimentos for orchestra or wind ensemble, for example, only two are in minor mode: *Masonic Funeral Music*, K. 477, and the Serenade for Winds, K. 388. Both are in C minor. Does that matter? Again, yes. Each of those pieces is an outstanding example of Mozart's genius. Surely it is no coincidence that he chose to express significant ideas and profound emotions in minor tonalities.

Consider another example. Only two of Mozart's 27 piano concertos are in minor mode: No. 20 in D minor, K. 466, and No. 24 in C minor, K. 491. None of the concertos for strings or winds is in a minor key. Few of Mozart's chamber works are, either—but time and again, Mozart returned to certain tonalities that apparently provided him with the expressive raw material he required to address the human condition through abstract music. His two string quartets in D minor, string quintet in G minor and piano quartet in G minor are superb, dramatic compositions: full of the stream of memorable themes we treasure in Mozart, and also imbued with a glorious combination of spontaneity and inevitable logic.

And therein lies a conundrum. For whatever reason, Mozart seems to have reserved his most profound utterances for the works in minor mode. The earlier "little" G minor, K. 185, is widely regarded to be his first mature symphony and a landmark work. The "great" G minor, K. 550, which we hear this weekend, is one of the masterpieces of symphonic literature. In the romantic era, musicians and critics seized upon the two G-minor symphonies and the two minor mode concerti as "proof" that Mozart was, at heart, a romantic. By rebelling against the convention of the day, they argued, he manifested a sympathy for the romantic notion of the artist asserting his individuality.

Lest we interpret this phenomenon out of context, remember that all tonal works have passages in minor mode. Frequently, the inner movements of a major-mode composition may be cast in minor mode for contrast, which is an important principle governing all tonal music. More to the point, Mozart's personal musical language was heavily colored with chromaticism. This means that he "flavored" his melodies and harmonies with notes that implied a different context. It is not unlike a savory sauce with a hint of cinnamon. The overall taste leans more to salty and tangy, but the spice adds a subtle touch of sweetness that alters one's perception and pleasure. Mozart was an expert at using harmonic inflection the way a master chef uses herbs and spices.