

Mozart & Mendelssohn

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Gioachino Rossini Overture to *L'italiana in Algeri*

Rossini's opera overtures are justly celebrated for their joyous melodies and manic energy. For *L'italiana in Algeri*, he wrote a masterpiece full of surprises. Listen for woodwind solos: oboe in the slow introduction, joined by flute, piccolo and bassoon in the Allegro. In a signature "Rossini crescendo," the overture builds to a cymbal-crashing close.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola and Orchestra, K. 364

Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante is a splendid double concerto, rich in emotional depth, musical substance and superb woodwind writing. Mozart's personal affinity for viola—his instrument of choice when playing chamber music—surely affected his marvelous contrast of color in the two solo instruments. His joyous finale is certain to send you home with a big grin on your face.

Antonio Vivaldi Piccolo Concerto in C Major, RV 443

Vivaldi wrote concertos for every instrument known at the time. This jewel for *flautino*—likely intended for the recorder—works beautifully for piccolo. Its sparkling high register contrasts with the string accompaniment in three succinct movements, showcasing the player's agility and tone.

Felix Mendelssohn Symphony No. 4 in A Major, Op. 90 ("Italian")

Mendelssohn captures Italy's physical beauty, spirituality, sunny climate and folk heritage in the "Italian" Symphony. Each movement shifts mood and atmosphere. The Andante con moto has been likened to a pilgrims' procession. Infectious gaiety and irresistible themes abound, even in the minor-mode finale.

Gioachino Rossini: Overture to *L'italiana in Algeri*

Gioachino Rossini

Born: February 29, 1792, in Pesaro, Italy

Died: November 13, 1868, in Passy, near Paris, France

Composed: April–May 1813

World Premiere: Venice's Teatro San Benedetto on 22 May 1813

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1955–56 season. Samuel Antek conducted.

Duration: 9 minutes

Instrumentation: The Symphony performs the German edition, which calls for piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.

One of the most facile musical geniuses in history, Gioachino Rossini composed with great speed. Even by his own brisk standards, however, the completion of *L'italiana in Algeri* (*The Italian Girl in Algiers*) was an impressive feat. He dashed off the score to the entire opera in a scant 27 days. More amazing still is the astonishingly high quality of the music. Opera buffs consider *L'italiana* to be one of Rossini's greatest works, second only to *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, which followed it by only three years.

The opera was a smash hit and has held the stage ever since, despite a ridiculous plot that stretched belief then, and is altogether absurd today. Its overture is a masterpiece. Cast in Rossini's favored form of a slow introduction followed by a brisk allegro sonata form without development, the overture begins with strings playing pizzicato. They provide the backdrop for a florid oboe solo. A brief clarinet echo heralds the transition to the joyous Allegro, with abundant woodwind solos.

Rossini gives the initial argument to the upper woodwinds, with full orchestra providing exclamation points. His lyrical second theme goes again to the oboe, with a sprightly response from the piccolo. A signature Rossini crescendo follows in this truncated sonata form. When the second theme returns in the recapitulation, Rossini has cleverly reversed his instrumentation, so that piccolo and bassoon state the melody in two-octave unison, with the oboe delivering the answering figure. It is classic Rossini: full of color and imagination, without disrupting the forward momentum of this effective curtain-raiser.

ROSSINI'S *L'ITALIANA IN ALGERI*

Rossini's 11th opera, *L'italiana in Algeri*, had its first performance in Venice's Teatro san Benedetto in May 1813. Angelo Anelli had written the libretto several years earlier for Milan's La Scala, where a now-forgotten composer named Luigi Mosca (1775–1824) first set it to music in 1808. Rossini tightened up Anelli's libretto for the Venetian production, emphasizing its farcical elements and putting his own comic genius to splendid use.

His Venetian public received the opera with rapturous enthusiasm, responding to its clever balance of caricature, comedy, and psychological depth. The composer was only 21, but it was already clear that a brilliant future lay ahead of him.

The opera, loosely based on the legend of Roxelana, the favorite slave of Suleiman the Magnificent, takes place in Algiers in about 1805. Mustafa, the Bey of Algiers, has tired of his wife Elvira. He has directed his staff to marry off his rejected spouse to a captured Italian slave, Lindoro, then to find the Bey a suitable Italian replacement bride. By coincidence, the spunky Italian maiden Isabella has just been shipwrecked on the Algerian coast, while on a mission seeking her missing lover, Lindoro, who is rumored to be an Algerian captive. Isabella is brought to Mustafa, who is immediately smitten by her beauty and charm. The balance of the opera consists of Isabella's successful plotting to avoid the Bey's advances while simultaneously arranging for her and Lindoro's escape from Algiers. Along the way, Rossini's music accompanies a preposterous sneezing scene and other equally ridiculous situations, all to the audience's great merriment.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola and Orchestra, K. 364 (320d)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1779

World Premiere: The first performance is undocumented, but probably took place in Salzburg in 1779

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1997–98 season. Violinist Ariel Shamai and violist Ori Kam were the soloists;

Zdenek Macal conducted.

Duration: 30 minutes

Instrumentation: two oboes, two horns, solo violin, solo viola and strings.

What exactly *is* a sinfonia concertante? As its name (pronounced sin-foh-NEE-uh cohn-chair-TAHN-teh) implies, the genre has roots in the Italian symphony and concerto and draws on both traditions to yield a unique synthesis. In some ways we may think of it as a post-Baroque concerto grosso for the later 18th century. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* defines it as: “[A] concert genre of the late 18th and early 19th centuries for solo instruments -- usually two, three or four, but on occasion as many as seven or even nine --with orchestra. The term implies ‘symphony with important and extended solo parts’, but the form is closer to concerto than symphony.”

Mozart’s Sinfonia concertante, K. 364, is justifiably among the best-known compositions with that title. Composed in 1779, his last year in Salzburg, it must be considered among his most important contributions to the concerto form, second only to the incomparable mature piano concertos and the late Clarinet Concerto, K. 622. It eclipses the charming, but youthful, violin concertos (all composed in the mid-1770s) and surpasses the four horn concertos written for Joseph Leutgeb by virtue of its larger scale and profound slow movement.

A major component of the Sinfonia concertante’s appeal and mastery derive from Mozart’s intimate knowledge of both solo instruments. It is quite likely that he played the viola part of this work at its first performances in Salzburg. His growing maturity and genius are best observed in the magnificent C-minor slow movement, whose ensemble writing for the two soloists (particularly in the cadenza) demands a summit of musicianship. Mozart’s biographer Eric Blom has called K.364 “a beautiful, dark-colored work in which a passion not at all suited to an archiepiscopal court, and perhaps disclosing active revolt against it, seems to smoulder under a perfectly decorous style and exquisite proportion.”

And yet the work’s outer movements burst with joy and enthusiasm, expressed with a confidence that belies authorship from a young man of only 23 years.

Antonio Vivaldi: Piccolo Concerto in C Major, RV 443

Antonio Vivaldi

Born: March 4, 1678, in Venice, Italy

Died: July 28, 1741, in Vienna, Austria

Duration: 12 minutes

World Premiere: No details are known about the composition or first performance of this concerto.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: Summer 1997. Kathleen Nester was the soloist; David Commanday conducted.

Instrumentation: solo piccolo, strings and continuo.

Both violinist and composer, Vivaldi was a major proponent of the solo concerto in Italy. The lion's share his Vivaldi's more than 300 solo concertos are for violin; however, he also composed for nearly every instrument of his day. Some surprises crop up among those other concertos. For example, a startling total of 37 concertos have survived for bassoon. (One of those little girls at the Ospedale della Pietà, with which Vivaldi was associated for decades, must have been quite a gifted bassoonist!) Three of his concerti specify flautino rather than transverse flute or recorder. Flautino, as the Italian diminutive implies, is a small recorder, that is, one with a higher range. Although we cannot state with authority what instrument Vivaldi had in mind for the flautino solo in the concerto in C major, RV 443, it must have been something like a sopranino recorder. The music works beautifully for piccolo.

This concerto adheres to the fast-slow-fast movement order that Vivaldi standardized. The two outer movements are tightly constructed ritornello structures that demand superb breath control and formidable technique. Vivaldi allows the soloist the opportunity to demonstrate beautiful tone with a violinistic cantilena in the lovely slow movement. This Largo in E minor keeps the accompaniment minimal and chordal, allowing the soloist to embellish the elegant melodic line with well-placed ornaments. The finale has a dance-like flavor enhanced by the sprightly timbre of the sopranino recorder. This is the most virtuosic of the three movements, with breath-taking passage work and cadenza-like sections.

Felix Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 4 in A, Op.90 (“Italian”)

Felix Mendelssohn

Born: February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: November 4, 1847, in Leipzig, Germany

Composed: 1830–1833

World Premiere: May 13, 1833, in London. The composer conducted the Philharmonic Society.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1939–40 season. Frieder Weissmann conducted.

Duration: 27 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani and strings.

Writing to his sisters from Italy in 1831, 22-year-old Felix Mendelssohn described his new symphony as “the liveliest thing I have yet done, especially the last movement.” Ironically, the last movement that so pleased him in the “Italian” Symphony’s early stages proved to be a stumbling block. Mendelssohn was never entirely satisfied with the finale to his Fourth Symphony and withheld the work from publication during his lifetime. How difficult for 21st-century listeners to understand, as perfect a jewel as this beloved symphony seems! From the opening woodwind chirping and the lilt of the first string theme, the “Italian” Symphony sweeps us willingly along in its joyous burble, a mountain brook with gleaming sunlight dappling in endless variety upon its surface.

Italian culture delivered with German technique

Brilliantly orchestrated, the “Italian” Symphony is the work of a master. It hardly seems possible that a young man in his early 20s could have composed it. So closely knit are its four movements that it almost seems unjust to single any of them out. But Mendelssohn, the classicist who also successfully embraced the romantic concept of program music, captured several aspects of Italian culture with consummate skill.

A procession of priests, a gorgeous melody and a brisk Italian dance

In particular, his slow movement, because of its walking bass, has been variously likened to a procession of pilgrims (such as he would have seen on the roads around Naples), or perhaps a group of monks methodically going about their tasks on foot. If less explicitly pictorial, the third movement is surely one of the most melodious creations in all the romantic literature, and scored with exquisite delicacy; the trio section, with its hunting motif for horns and bassoons, recalls the magical world of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

The finale that so frustrated Mendelssohn is a saltarello. This energetic and lively Italian dance originated in medieval times, but remained popular well into the 19th century. Mendelssohn vividly captures the dance's energy; his genius lies in setting it in minor mode. That imaginative stroke is one of the traits that sets this beloved symphony among the masterworks.