

Jessie Montgomery & Mozart

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphony No. 38 in D Major, K. 504 (“Prague”)

Mozart’s *Prague* Symphony takes its nickname from the Czech capital, where audiences loved Mozart and his music more than in Vienna. It is distinguished by its limitation to three movements—and by the exceptional quality of Mozart’s music. His slow introduction to the first movement is stately and dignified. It gives way to a sparkling allegro as much fun as the Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*. Depth, expression and marvelous woodwind writing adorn the central Andante. The “missing” movement is minuet/trio—there is none—but Mozart more than compensates with his delightful finale, cast in sonata form. In fact, all three movements of the *Prague* Symphony are in sonata form, attesting to the infinite variety Mozart drew from that structural organization.

Jessie Montgomery: *Rounds* for Piano and String Orchestra

Jessie Montgomery has emerged as a major voice in American music. This weekend we hear *Rounds*, her concerto for piano and string orchestra composed for—and in collaboration with—our soloist, Awadagin Pratt. *Rounds* was just premiered last spring in Hilton Head, South Carolina. Montgomery says it was inspired by imagery and themes from T.S. Eliot’s epic poem *Four Quartets* and cast in the form of a rondo. She adds, “In addition, while working on the piece, I became fascinated by fractals [and the idea that . . .] every living organism has a rhythm that interacts and impacts with all the living things around it, [resulting in] a multitude of outcomes.” The centerpiece of this one-movement work is a partially improvised solo cadenza.

Richard Strauss: Suite from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Op. 60

Strauss extracted his Suite from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* from incidental music he had composed for Molière’s 17th-century satire. His extensive experience writing symphonic poems made him a masterful composer for orchestra. The suite is filled with piquant references to the earlier era in which the drama is set. Audience members who like Strauss’ delicious opera *Der Rosenkavalier* will be captivated by these saucy

movements. Listen for the prominent role for orchestral piano—it is devilishly hard!

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphony No. 38 in D Major, K. 504 (“Prague”)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1786; the autograph is dated 6 December 1786

World Premiere: January 19, 1787, in Prague. The composer conducted.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1968–69 season. Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 26 minutes

Instrumentation: flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani and strings.

Mozart’s beloved opera *The Marriage of Figaro* was greeted with only lukewarm enthusiasm when it was first presented in Vienna on May 1, 1786. To the northwest, however, in the Bohemian capital of Prague, the Czechs loved it. They thronged to performances, adapted its arias into popular dances and sang its melodies in the streets. Hungry for the acclaim that continued to elude him in Vienna, Mozart set out for Prague in January 1787 to capitalize on *Figaro*’s success.

He took with him a new symphony that he had completed in early December. Though it was probably finished before he decided to make the journey to Prague, the work has been known as the “Prague” Symphony since its first performance there on January 19, 1787. K. 504 is also known as the “symphony without minuet,” unusual in Mozart’s late works. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* suggests that Czech audiences were accustomed to such curtailed symphonic form.

An extensive slow introduction to the first movement presages the world of *Don Giovanni*. Specifically, Mozart’s Overture to *Don Giovanni* is also in the key of D, with a portentous slow introduction even more sinister in its implications. The Allegro section of the symphony’s first movement overflows with the delighted exuberance Mozart must have experienced in receptive Prague. Its development section foreshadows *The Magic Flute*, particularly in the handling of the woodwinds. Many musicians consider the “Prague” Symphony’s first movement to be Mozart’s finest symphonic effort.

A relaxed Andante in triple time seems to half-merge characteristics of both courtly minuet and cantilena; however, this slow movement, like the outer movements, is in sonata form. The finale, marked Presto, is mischievous and spirited, rounding out a work that is surely on a par with Mozart's superb final symphonic trilogy.

Jessie Montgomery: *Rounds* for Piano and String Orchestra

Jessie Montgomery

Born: December 8, 1981, in New York, New York

Composed: 2021–22

World Premiere: March 27, 2022, in Hilton Head, South Carolina. Awadagin Pratt was the soloist.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: These performances are the New Jersey Symphony premiere.

Duration: 14 minutes

Instrumentation: Solo piano and strings.

The fact that Jessie Montgomery's music has already been performed by the New Jersey Symphony in this still-young centennial celebration season—the orchestra played her *Banner* in October—is an indication of how prominent her voice has become in American music. Only 40, Montgomery has rocketed to the top of the most-frequently-performed list, writing powerful and accessible music for chamber ensemble, chorus, solo instruments and orchestra.

A violinist and educator as well as a composer, Montgomery grew up in a musical household on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Her parents worked in music and theater and were active in neighborhood arts initiatives. Montgomery earned her undergraduate degree from The Juilliard School in violin performance, and subsequently completed a master's in film composition and multimedia from NYU. She was a graduate fellow in music composition at Princeton and is currently Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony.

Rounds is her first composition for piano. The work was a consortium commission among nine American orchestras by the Art of The Piano Foundation for pianist Awadagin Pratt.

Her composer's note explains the poetic origins of *Rounds*:

Rounds for solo piano and string orchestra is inspired by the imagery and themes from T.S. Eliot's epic

poem *Four Quartets*. Early in the first poem, “Burnt Norton,” we find these evocative lines:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

(Text © T.S. Eliot. Reproduced by courtesy of Faber and Faber Ltd)

In addition to this inspiration, while working on the piece, I became fascinated by fractals (infinite patterns found in nature that are self-similar across different scales) and also delved into the work of contemporary biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber who writes about the interdependency of all beings. Weber explores how every living organism has a rhythm that interacts and impacts with all of the living things around it and results in a multitude of outcomes.

Like Eliot in *Four Quartets*, beginning to understand this interconnectedness requires that we slow down, listen, and observe both the effect and the opposite effect caused by every single action and moment. I’ve found this is an exercise that lends itself very naturally towards musical gestural possibilities that I explore in the work – action and reaction, dark and light, stagnant and swift.

Structurally, with these concepts in mind, I set the form of the work as a rondo, within a rondo, within a rondo. The five major sections are a rondo; section “A” is also a rondo in itself; and the cadenza – which is partially improvised by the soloist – breaks the pattern, yet, contains within it, the overall form of the work.

To help share some of this with the performers, I’ve included the following poetic performance note at the start of the score:

Inspired by the constancy, the rhythms, and duality of life, in order of relevance to form:

Rondine – AKA Swifts (like a sparrow) flying in circles patterns

Playing with opposites – dark/light; stagnant/swift

Fractals – infinite design

I am grateful to my friend Awadagin Pratt for his collaborative spirit and ingenuity in helping to usher my first work for solo piano into the world.

— Jessie Montgomery, February 2022

The principal sections of *Rounds* are discernible by their varied textures: rapid-fire repeated triplets, dense chords somewhat prescient of Messiaen, but rendered with a percussive approach more akin to Prokofiev; and dreamy floating figures that seem to post half-questions. The extended solo cadenza—approximately four minutes of the work’s duration—draws freely on these disparate elements, underscoring the subtle similarities in melodic and rhythmic contours that lend Montgomery’s piece its cohesion.

Richard Strauss: Suite from *Der Bürger als Edelmann* (*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*), Op. 60

Richard Strauss

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Germany

Died: September 8, 1949, in Garmisch, Germany

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1973–74 season. Henry Lewis conducted.

Instrumentation: Flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, piano, percussion, harp and strings.

Like much of Richard Strauss’ instrumental music, the Suite from *Der Bürger als Edelmann*—better known in its original French title as *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*—has its origins in opera. While working on the libretto for the opera *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912), Strauss’ librettist and collaborator Hugo von Hoffmannsthal became captivated by the idea of incorporating a play into an opera. He chose Molière’s 17th-century classic comedy, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* for adaptation as an intermezzo within the opera. In the first version, Hoffmannsthal freely adapted Molière’s play into three acts with incidental music by Strauss.

Strauss had his doubts about the project from the beginning. His skepticism triggered considerable tension between him and Hoffmannsthal. The composer’s theatrical instincts proved to be correct, and the *Ariadne-*

cum-Molière merger was unsuccessful at its Stuttgart premiere in 1912. The project was shelved for almost six years. A Berlin revival in 1918 presented the play with Strauss' incidental music, separate from the opera. For that second version, Strauss composed some new numbers, to no avail. Again, the production failed.

One year later, Strauss extracted the nine movements he considered most effective in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* score, publishing them as the suite in 1920. In that version, which we hear this weekend, the music has become a 20th-century classic. Like Strauss's beloved suite drawn from his opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, the suite from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* straddles the old and the new with irresistible charm. In the delicacy of his chamber scoring, Strauss pays homage to Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87), some of whose original 17th-century music Strauss reworked from the Baroque French master's comédie-ballet based on the Molière play. (The Courante and the Finale to Act I are both based on Lully.)

Partially because of its roots in the music and drama of an earlier era, the music of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* is unabashedly tonal and melodic. The lilting rhythms of courtly dance music and Strauss' mocking, incisive humor are among his most effective ploys. As always, he orchestrates brilliantly, using the coloristic effects available in his select ensemble to achieve humor, sentiment, pomp or grace.

One of the distinguishing features of the suite is the presence of the piano as a member of the ensemble. Strauss uses the keyboard as a continuo instrument in the same way that the harpsichord would be used in an *opera buffa*, or as Lully might have employed it in a comédie-ballet. But the different sonority of the modern piano draws attention to it, giving the piano more of a concertato or obbligato role. The smaller orchestra enhances clarity of texture, underscoring the conscious references to Baroque or rococo style. In *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Strauss' idiom is Mozartian rather than Wagnerian.

This information is provided solely as a service to and for the benefit of New Jersey Symphony subscribers and patrons. Any other use without express written permission is strictly forbidden.