

Xian Conducts Mozart

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, K. 525

Eine kleine Nachtmusik is arguably Mozart's best known and widely recognized composition, yet we have no idea what prompted him to compose it! There is no mention of it in his correspondence. The title translates to "A Little Night Music," or *serenata notturna*, the Italian term that Mozart's contemporaries knew. Serenades were generally outdoor entertainment music. Unlike woodwinds and brass, string instruments do not carry well outdoors. Mozart's choice of strings for a serenade adds to the work's mystery.

The *Nachtmusik*'s first movement is in sonata form. A delightful Romance follows in the slow movement, then a melodious minuet with trio, and a folk-like finale. The unassuming grace of Mozart's melodies ensures that the *Nachtmusik* will have a large and devoted fan club for a long time.

Johann Sebastian Bach: Double Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins and Strings, BWV 1043

Bach was keenly interested in the Italian style of concerto writing, particularly Vivaldi's works. The Double Concerto adheres to the Vivaldian model of fast-slow-fast tempos. The opening Allegro emphasizes contrast between full orchestra and the two soloists, whose entrances are in close imitation. The slow movement, an elegant F-major *cantilena* in gently rocking 12/8 meter, is reminiscent of Italian opera.

A stormy, aggressive opening motive sets the tone for Bach's finale. The orchestra shares in the densely overlapped principal statement. In two places, the soloists play repeated double-stops in steady eighth notes, forming a chordal accompaniment to the orchestra's sequential gestures.

Michael Abels: *Delights and Dances*

Michael Abels is best known for the opera *Omar*, co-written with Rhiannon Giddens, and his scores for the Jordan Peele horror films *Get Out* and *Us*. Abels' hip-hop-influenced score for *Us* was short-listed for the

Oscar, and was named “Score of the Decade” by the online publication *The Wrap*.

Delights and Dances was commissioned by the Sphinx Organization for its 10th anniversary celebrating diversity in concert music. Abels describes the piece as a quartet of string soloists in a kind of diptych of American musical genres, one regarded as “Black” and the other “white.” He has written:

The piece begins with a slow, lyrical introduction that grows from a cello solo into a duet with the viola, culminating in a gentle crescendo for the full quartet. The first major section is blues ... The second half is a rousing bluegrass hoedown.

Delights and Dances is eclectic, drawing on bluegrass, jazz, Latin rhythms, and blues. Its progression from the modernist opening moments to the rumbustious energy of the hoedown is exhilarating and fun.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphony No. 35 in D Major, K. 385, “Haffner”

The Haffners were wealthy Salzburgers whom Mozart had known since childhood. In 1776, the family commissioned him to write a serenade in honor of their daughter Elizabeth's marriage. When Elizabeth's brother Sigmund was ennobled in July 1782, he sought out Mozart's father Leopold to request that Wolfgang compose a symphony for the occasion.

The Symphony's character is festive, ceremonial, and positive. The bold octave leap and pronounced dotted rhythm of the initial motive dominates the entire first movement. The two inner movements are less assertive and more serenade-like—but Mozart specified that the finale be played “as fast as possible.” The “Haffner” symphony achieved unusual renown during Mozart's lifetime, including publication in Vienna and performances in Paris.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, K. 525

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: August 1787

World Premiere: Undocumented, but possibly Vienna, 1787. It was published posthumously

Duration: 16 minutes

Instrumentation: strings

Eine kleine Nachtmusik (A Little Night Music or Evening Serenade) is a wonderful work with which to introduce people to classical music. Its graceful melodies and sunny disposition are readily appealing; those who claim no familiarity with Mozart are generally surprised how familiar these four movements are. Those who do know something about music find in the *Nachtmusik* a perfect symphony in miniature, illustrating in a concise manner the four-movement structure that governed the Viennese classical tradition for so long. One of the *Nachtmusik*'s ironies is that it is not a symphony at all, but a serenade, and that it wasn't even in four movements in its original version, but rather in five.

Furthermore, *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* presents us with a paradox. It is probably Mozart's best known, best loved, and most widely recognized composition, yet we have no idea what prompted him to compose it! There are few outward clues, and no mention of the work in the composer's correspondence. The score is dated August 10, 1787. Why did he interrupt work on *Don Giovanni* to compose the *Nachtmusik*? Probably because of a commission from a nobleman, but whom?

The title translates to "A Little Night Music," or *serenata notturna*, to use the 18th-century Italian term that Mozart's contemporaries would have recognized. This one is scored for strings alone, possibly even solo strings (that is, string quartet plus double bass). Serenades were generally outdoor entertainment music. The string ensemble does not generally carry well outdoors, the way more piercing woodwind timbres do. Mozart's choice of strings for a serenade adds to the work's mystery.

The *Nachtmusik*'s first movement is in sonata form. A delightful *Romanze* slow movement follows, then a melodious minuet with trio, and a folk-like finale reminiscent of Papageno's music in *The Magic Flute*. But *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* cannot have taken its shape from symphonic form, because the autograph manuscript is missing a page that was torn out, which we know contained another, second minuet/trio that has not survived.

In fact, the closer we look and listen to the *Nachtmusik*, the more like dance music it sounds, and the less like symphonic music. That characteristic is a considerable factor in its broad appeal. The immediacy of danceable rhythms and the unassuming, unobtrusive grace of its melodies ensure that the *Nachtmusik* will have a large and devoted fan club for a long time.

Johann Sebastian Bach: Double Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins and Strings, BWV 1043

Johann Sebastian Bach

Born: March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany

Died: July 28, 1750, in Leipzig

Composed: 1717–1723

World Premiere: Undocumented, but likely in the Cöthen court between 1717 and 1723.

Duration: 17 minutes

Instrumentation: two solo violins, strings, and continuo

Between 1717 and 1723, Bach was employed by Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, a music-loving nobleman from an area northeast of Weimar in what used to be called East Germany. The position was rather similar to the one that Haydn was to hold with the Esterházy family later on in the century. When Bach was engaged as Kapellmeister, Leopold's court boasted one of the largest and finest orchestras in Europe. Bach composed a considerable amount of instrumental music for the Cöthen musicians, including most of his solo concertos.

Bach was very interested in the Italian style of concerto writing, particularly the works of Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741). He studied Vivaldi's music avidly, sometimes copying the scores to develop greater familiarity with the style. It is no surprise that the D Minor Concerto for two violins reflects certain Italian Baroque characteristics.

The three movements adhere to the Vivaldian model of fast-slow-fast tempi. Bach makes extensive use of sequences and contrast between full orchestra (*ripieno*) and his solo group (*concertino*, in this case the two violins). The presence of two soloists in the D Minor Concerto highlights the contrapuntal intricacy of Bach's texture. Their entrances are frequently canonic; he also makes use of invertible counterpoint, whereby the two voices exchange material, maintaining the integrity of each contrapuntal line.

The slow movement, an elegant F major *cantilena* in gently rocking 12/8 meter, has particular melodic beauty. Once again, invertible counterpoint plays a significant role, but it is the suspended harmonies that enhance the operatic expressivity of this Largo.

A stormy, aggressive opening motive sets the tone for Bach's finale, which distances itself from the dance-like finales of his solo concertos. Indeed, the relationship between *concertino* and *ripieno* is practically reversed here. The orchestra shares in the densely overlapped principal statement, a close canon that functions as a *ritornello*. Twice in the course of the movement, both soloists play several measures repeated double-stops in steady eighth notes. Together, they form a chordal accompaniment to the sequential gestures the orchestra is tossing about. Bach's abundant melodic material attests to his power of imagination.

This Double Concerto was extremely popular throughout the 19th century, after the "Bach Revival" spearheaded by Felix Mendelssohn took hold. It remains one of Bach's best-loved instrumental compositions.

Michael Abels: *Delights and Dances*

Michael Abels

Born: October 8, 1962, in Phoenix, Arizona

Composed: 2007

World Premiere: February 11, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan. The performance featured the Harlem Quartet and the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra and the 2007 Sphinx Competition finalists.

Duration: 13 minutes

Instrumentation: solo string quartet and orchestral strings

Two-time Emmy-nominated composer Michael Abels is best known for the opera *Omar*, co-written with Rhiannon Giddens. Cinema fans know his scores for the Jordan Peele horror films *Get Out* and *Us*, for which Abels won a World Soundtrack Award, the Jerry Goldsmith Award, a Critics Choice nomination, and Image Aware nomination, as well as multiple critics' awards. Abels' hip-hop-influenced score for *Us* was short-listed for the Oscar and was named "Score of the Decade" by the online publication *The Wrap*.

Abels is co-founder of the Composers Diversity Collective, an advocacy group to increase visibility of composers of color in film, gaming, and streaming media. As a concert composer, he has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and NewMusicUSA. The Chicago Symphony and Philadelphia Orchestra are just two of the major ensembles who have performed his orchestral music.

Delights and Dances was commissioned by the Sphinx Organization, which seeks to promote representation and participation of Black and Latino musicians in classical music. The commission was a celebration of Sphinx's 10th anniversary celebrating diversity in concert music.

Abels describes the piece as a quartet of string soloists in a kind of diptych of American musical genres, one regarded as "Black" and the other "white." His composer's note explains its two principal sections.

The piece begins with a slow, lyrical introduction that grows from a cello solo into a duet with the viola, culminating in a gentle crescendo for the full quartet. The first major section is blues, which allows the soloists to flaunt their musical talents through a series of solos that are designed to sound improvised, although they are actually notated. The second half of the piece is a rousing bluegrass hoedown, once again featuring the quartet as they trade riffs back and forth (in a way that might recall "Dueling Banjo"), which culminates in a boisterous coda. It's a piece that celebrates musicians playing together. I hope it fills you with joy.

As is the case with many of Abels' compositions, *Delights and Dances* is an eclectic stylistic mix, with elements of bluegrass, jazz, Latin rhythms, and blues. Its progression from the more modernist opening moments to the rumbustious energy of the hoedown is exhilarating and fun.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphony No. 35 in D Major, K. 385, "Haffner"

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: Summer 1782

World Premiere: August 1782 in Salzburg; the exact date is uncertain, but prior to August 24.

Duration: 18 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Throughout history, patrons of the arts have earned a small measure of immortality through their association with painters, sculptors, writers, and musicians of genius. One of the better-known surnames in the Mozart canon is Haffner. It is the subtitle of two beloved orchestral works: the “Haffner” Serenade, K. 250, and the symphony that concludes this program. Both works are in D major, but their connections go far deeper than the shared tonality.

The Haffners were wealthy Salzburgers whose children Mozart had known since childhood. In 1776, the family commissioned him to write a serenade in honor of their daughter Elizabeth’s marriage. When Elizabeth’s brother Sigmund was ennobled in July 1782, he promptly sought out Leopold to request that Wolfgang compose another work for the occasion.

By then, Mozart had settled in Vienna. He was busy preparing for the premiere of his opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. He planned to marry Constanze Weber in August and was moving to a new residence in anticipation of the wedding. Despite this jam-packed schedule, he found time to accommodate Sigmund Haffner’s request.

Letters between Leopold and Mozart make clear that the new piece was initially conceived as another serenade, for Mozart composed two minutes and a march in addition to the four movements we hear. Both the serenity of the Andante and the straightforward quality of the surviving Minuet are representative of the lighter serenade style: probably intended for outdoor performance, and likely as background music to a large party.

When he composed the “Haffner” Symphony, Mozart’s star was ascendant in Vienna. Several months after he sent Leopold the score in Salzburg, he asked that it be returned to him so that he could present it at a concert of his music in the capital. He then incorporated flute and clarinet parts (instruments not available in Salzburg), suppressed the extra minuet and the march, and rearranged the symphony as we know it today.

In that form, its character is festive, ceremonial and positive: encapsulated by the bold octave leap and pronounced dotted rhythm of the famous opening motive, which dominates the entire first movement. The two inner movements are less assertive and more serenade-like, easy to imagine as ballroom or background music for a gathering of courtiers. Mozart’s finale, which he instructed his father was to be played “as fast as possible,” bears a strong relationship to Osmin’s aria in *Abduction*. The connection with opera was to manifest itself even more strongly in Mozart’s later instrumental music.

Six months after the “Haffner” Symphony’s first performance in Salzburg, Mozart made some minor revisions, principally in scoring, for a performance on March 23, 1783, in Vienna that was attended by the emperor. The “Haffner” symphony achieved unusual renown during Mozart’s lifetime, including publication in Vienna, and performance in Paris at the *Concert spirituel*.

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