

# Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Thu. July 21 The 103rd Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550

- I. Molto allegro (ca. 7 min)
- II. Andante (ca. 14 min)
- III. Menuetto. Allegretto – Trio (ca. 5 min)
- IV. Finale. Allegro assai (ca. 9 min)

Symphony Nos. 39, 40 and 41 were to be Mozart's last symphonies, part of a 'symphonic triptych of 1788' composed in a creative flurry that summer, respectively on June 26th, July 25th and August 10th. With cultural activities waning in light of the Austrian Empire's war with Turkey, it was also a troubling time for Mozart, as it was becoming more difficult for him to find work. In addition to these professional and economic difficulties, Mozart's six-month old daughter, Theresia had died during this same time period. Having moved to more economical housing in the suburbs of Vienna, Mozart attempted to paint a positive light on the situation when he wrote in a letter: "I have greater leisure to work now since I am not troubled by so many visitors." However, he also acknowledged the difficulties he faced as well: "...were I not visited so frequently by dark thoughts (which I must banish by force), I should still do better."

Mozart was not one to give up easily, though. And in spite of the difficulties he faced finding work in Vienna, scholars believe he may have turned his sights towards London at this point in his career. Since there had been no evidence for a commission for these three symphonies, it seems plausible that he composed them with the thought of presenting them on tour there, as was customary. In a letter written to a fellow-Mason, Michael Puchberg, Mozart wrote of plans for a new concert series, so it's possible the works were composed for this purpose as well.

While the trip to London never came about, Mozart toured several German cities in the spring of 1789. It is believed he conducted performances of his works, and may have included at least one of these new symphonies. Two years later, in Vienna, Antonio Salieri is believed to have conducted at least one, if not two, of these works. So while it had been previously thought that these works were not performed in Mozart's lifetime, scholars now believe that the composer did have the opportunity to hear at least one, if not all three of these final symphonic works before he died.

The two outer works, both in major keys, have been characterized as representing Mozart's lighter and brighter sides. No. 39 seems to present the gentle and upbeat nature of the composer, possibly with a nod to the royal patronage for whom he was often composing. No. 41 seems to show the composer's persistent side in the face of adversity, looking forward with optimism. The central symphonic work, No. 40 provides great contrast to these with its minor-key focus and much more serious tone, perhaps a reflection of the difficulties he was facing.

Known as the "Great G-minor Symphony" to contrast with his only other symphony in a minor key, "The Little G-minor" No. 25, Mozart's *sturm und drang* (storm and stress) style can clearly be heard with the intensity of emotions throughout. Dramatic contrasts in dynamics and irregular phrasings contribute to this intensity, as do the

quick harmonic changes especially heard in the development sections. The second movement provides some welcome contrast to the first at a much gentler pace and although in a major key, still hints at some pending gloom with its melancholic tune. The trio of the third movement also provides contrast to the minuet preceding it, with its major mode and longer legato lines. The finale leads us unknowingly into Schöenberg-like dissonances hundreds of years before its time, avoiding the G home-tone purposefully in the development before returning to the frenetic pace and a dramatic conclusion in a solid G-minor, not reverting to a major-key closing as other composers had been inclined to do at that time. Instead perhaps he composed an entire symphony in a major key, No. 41, to follow in this triptych of symphonies composed, it seems, as a set.

**Instrumentation:** flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, strings

## Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) Symphony No. 4 in F minor, op. 36

- I. Andante sostenuto (ca. 18 min)
- II. Andantino in modo di canzona (ca. 10 min)
- III. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato. Allegro (ca. 6 min)
- IV. Finale: Allegro con fuoco (ca. 10 min)

Tchaikovsky dedicated this piece to his 'best friend' Nadezhda von Meck, and to our benefit wrote her at great length, revealing the intent behind his writing of this symphony. Mme von Meck had recently been widowed and, upon discovering Tchaikovsky's music, as well

as his need for financial support, she generously provided this sustenance from afar. It seems the composer appreciated not only her monetary assistance, but depended on correspondence with her for support as well.

At the time that he began writing this work in the spring of 1877, Tchaikovsky faced a major turning point in his personal life. Only a few months earlier he had received his first commission from Mme von Meck, which gave

him the freedom to compose without worrying about his financial situation. However, he found himself in a position to be married, against his will it seems, to Antonina, a young student at the Conservatory. The turmoil that enveloped his life at that point became an integral part of his music, as he indicated in his correspondences.

Regarding the opening fanfare, heard throughout the first movement, Tchaikovsky states that it is “the seed of the whole symphony.... This is fate, this is that fateful force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal.” The second movement, he stated, was intended to express ‘a weary regret for all that is hopelessly gone’. And in the third movement, the tunes alternate between that of “drunken peasants” and “a street song” representing “the elusive images which rush past in the imagination when you have drunk a little wine and experience the first stage of

intoxication.”

In the final movement, Tchaikovsky incorporates the traditional folk song ‘In the field a little birch tree stood’, a reference to his young wife. The ‘fate’ theme, however, returns in full force to indicate the ongoing turmoil in his life, as he explains: “the irrepressible fate again appears and reminds you of yourself.... but others have not even turned around, they have not glanced at you and they have not noticed that you are solitary and sad.” In the end, the composer attempts to parallel Beethoven’s triumphant finale, when he suggests: “If within yourself you find no reasons for joy, look at others. Go among the people. Observe how they can enjoy themselves, surrendering themselves wholeheartedly to joyful feelings.”

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**Instrumentation:** flute 2, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, bass drum, cymbals), strings

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