

Reno Chamber Orchestra
Small But Mighty
March 16 & 17, 2024

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria

No reminder is really needed of the unique stature of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the history of Western music. His vast catalog of compositions – over 600 of them, including some 15 operas, 17 masses, 50 symphonies, 20 piano concertos, 23 string quartets, and much more – epitomizes the German-Austrian Classical style. His music is recognized and loved all over the world for its melodic, harmonic, and textural richness and beauty. The son of a well-known violinist and pedagogue, Mozart was one of the greatest prodigies ever, playing his first public concert at age five and composing his first music at seven. Before reaching the age of ten he had already played recitals in front of the likes of Marie Antoinette and King George III of England. He traveled throughout Europe through his teens. After failing to find a secure post elsewhere, and having grown dissatisfied with his career in Salzburg, Mozart moved to Vienna, where he spent the last decade of his life. While he enjoyed some successes with his new operas and piano concertos, life there grew more and more precarious, leading to his early death at age thirty-five.

Piano Concerto No. 12 in A major, K. 414

Composed: 1782

Duration: 25 minutes

Instrumentation: solo piano, 2 oboes, 2 horns, strings

Mozart wrote the Piano Concerto No. 12 and its two companions – the Concerto No. 11 in F major, K. 413 and No. 13 in C major, K. 415 – in the wake of the success of his opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. By this time, Mozart was established in his new home in Vienna, gradually becoming known to both the nobility and general public as a composer and pianist. Still working to make a financial success of it, though, Mozart sought to publish his three new concertos by subscription, inviting those interested simply to bring four ducats to his home. He tried to make the publication more attractive by providing for performance by just a string quartet accompanying the keyboard. This *a quattro* performance, designed in Mozart's time for either the home or a small salon, is heard in this concert.

Few took Mozart up on the subscription offer, however. After an unsuccessful attempt to see the works into print in Paris, they were eventually published in 1785 by the Artaria publishing house – the only time Mozart ever saw any of his piano concertos appear in print. While publishing didn't provide him much income, live performances did, as Mozart presented seventeen new piano concertos during his decade in Vienna, fifteen of them between 1782 and 1786. He premiered the Concertos Nos. 11-13, the first of his Vienna concertos, at a

series of Lenten concerts in early 1783.

In a letter to his father from December 1782, Mozart wrote of the three concertos that they “are a happy medium between too heavy and too light. They are very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, and natural, without being insipid. There are parts here and there from which connoisseurs alone can derive satisfaction, but these passages are written in such a way that the less learned cannot fail to be pleased, albeit without knowing why.”

The first movement of the Concerto No. 12 opens with a graceful, flowing theme that soon picks up pace, followed by an equally graceful second theme with some back-and-forth between the strings. A third idea closes out the exposition of this sonata-form movement. At that point, the piano enters with embellished versions of the main themes. Mozart never seems to run out of delightful melodic ideas and intriguing byways, with moments of tension and excitement emerging, then easily resolving into something new. The recapitulation of the original melodies leads into a virtuoso solo piano cadenza – somewhat unusually, Mozart wrote out cadenzas for all three movements for players who couldn’t improvise them, which would have been the norm during that time.

An easeful melody, with a hint of melancholy, opens the second movement, the orchestra stating it first, then the piano. After meditating on that melody, the piano pulls the music into the minor for a poignant central section. But the opening theme soon returns, introduced this time by the piano. Another short piano cadenza arrives near the end. Mozart pays tribute in this movement to his friend and mentor, Johann Christian Bach, who had passed away on New Year's Day of 1782, quoting his overture to *La calamita de' cuori*.

The third movement begins with a playful theme that becomes the repeating refrain in this rondo. A phrase from the cellos emerges a couple of times, lending just a hint of darkness. Once again, Mozart's imagination and melodic fecundity is evident. A sudden outburst from the orchestra leads into another solo cadenza before a surprising, dramatic turn, and a buoyant final statement of the opening theme.

Gustav Mahler

Born: July 7, 1860, Kaliště, Bohemia (Austrian Empire)

Died: May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria

Gustav Mahler has become one of the most popular and frequently-performed of classical composers. He was also among the most respected conductors of his day. Born to Austrian parents in what is now the Czech Republic, Mahler was fascinated as a child by folk and military music. He made his debut as a pianist at ten, and was accepted into the Vienna Conservatory at fifteen. From humble posts leading musical theater, he quickly won conducting positions at important opera houses in Budapest and Hamburg, eventually becoming director of the Vienna Court Opera in 1897. His energy and high standards as a music director made him notorious, but also very successful. Composing his large-scale works – including nine symphonies (and some of a tenth), the symphonic cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), and many songs – was reserved for the summer months.

His music's anticipation of some of the more advanced techniques of the twentieth century made Mahler an important influence on composers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Dmitri Shostakovich. Mahler's works were largely ignored during his lifetime and for decades after his death, but enjoyed a substantial revival in the 1960s that continues to the present.

Symphony No. 4 in G major (arranged by Klaus Simon)

Composed: 1899-1900

Duration: 55 minutes

Original instrumentation: 4 flutes (third and fourth doubling piccolos), 3 oboes (third doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, timpani, percussion, harp, strings, solo soprano

Simon instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo), oboe (doubling English horn), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), bassoon, horn, percussion, harmonium (or accordion), piano, strings, solo soprano

Gustav Mahler's first three symphonies, composed over the years 1888 to 1896, met with but little success. Most of his time in the last years of the nineteenth century was spent in attempts to reform and revive the Court Opera in Vienna, where he had become director in 1897. His confrontations with the opera's management, musicians, and singers were frequent and front-page news. While his efforts there were ultimately successful with audiences and critics alike, the hard work left him with little time or inclination to compose, and something like three years passed with no new music. Mahler came to fear that his inspiration had dried up.

Then came the summer of 1899. Mahler had long set aside his summer vacations for composing, with the rest of the year dedicated to conducting. In 1899 he was once again trying to compose at a summer home at Aussee, a small spa in the Salzkammergut, but lack of energy combined with terrible weather and what he called the "ghastly health resort music" that was constant there left him frustrated. Eventually, though, inspiration struck, and by the end of the summer he had completed about half of the Symphony No. 4. The rest was completed the following summer in the little village of Maiernigg.

After some revisions, the symphony was premiered on November 25, 1901 in Munich, with Mahler himself leading the Kaim Orchestra and soprano soloist Margarete Michalek. The reception wasn't particularly friendly there or in subsequent performances over the next couple of years. Eventually, though, audiences warmed to the work, and at least one Mahler authority, Donald Mitchell, has suggested that the relative accessibility of the Fourth Symphony contributed significantly to Mahler's great later popularity.

The Symphony No. 4 is the last of Mahler's so-called "Wunderhorn" symphonies. It and the Symphonies Nos. 2 and 3 employ musical ideas from Mahler's earlier song cycle *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn), settings of texts from the well-known collection of German folk poetry assembled around 1800 by Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim. Mahler was always attracted to the simplicity of folk poetry, finding it closer to nature than more elaborate, literary verse. In at least one interview, Mahler considered his first four

symphonies a “perfectly self-contained tetralogy,” with the First taking on themes of suffering and eventual triumph, the Second death and resurrection, the Third human existence and God, and the Fourth eternal life in heaven.

Mahler expert Deryck Cooke calls the first movement of the Fourth Symphony a “pastoral ‘walk through the countryside.’” Mahler himself likened the first movement's melodies to “a dewdrop on a flower that suddenly illuminated by the sun, bursts into a thousand lights and colors.” After an opening with flute and sleigh bells, the first main theme is introduced, in which some have found the influence of Franz Schubert. The subsequent lyrical theme is marked *Breit gesungen* (broadly sung). The comparative restraint and classical outlines of the presentation of the themes, though, changes drastically for the development section, which is complex and explores a number of moods and distant keys. As Mahler described this music, “sometimes the atmosphere darkens and grows strangely terrifying. Not that the sky itself clouds over: it goes on shining with its everlasting blue. But we suddenly become afraid of it, just as on a beautiful day in the sun-dappled forest one is often overcome by a panic terror.” That section ends with a trumpet fanfare that Mahler called “Der kleine Appel” (The little summons), an idea that recurs at the beginning of his Fifth Symphony. The mood calms again as the main themes are recapitulated, leading to a final burst of child-like happiness.

In the Scherzo second movement, a horn call introduces a ghostly theme from the solo violin (retuned, or *scordatura*) – said by Mahler's wife Alma to have been inspired by Arnold Böcklin's famous painting *Self-Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle* (1872). Likewise, a score owned by Mahler's friend, conductor Willem Mengelberg, labeled this movement “Totentanz Holbein: Der Tod führt uns” (Holbein's Dance of Death: Death leads us), a reference to Hans Holbein the Younger's 1538 series of woodcuts known as *Danse macabre* (Dance of Death). After some rather spooky music, colored by the use of mutes and *col legno* bowing (playing with the wood rather than the hair of the bow) by the strings, comes a short horn postlude. The first of the two trio interludes features a rather laid-back dance that calls to mind the Austrian *Ländler*. More macabre music and an extended return of the *Ländler* theme lead to a quiet return of the opening solo violin music, ending the movement on a note of humor.

While writing the third movement, Mahler said that he sometimes envisioned the face of his mother, “smiling through her tears.” The movement takes the form of a double theme and variations. Mahler once said that it had been inspired by “a vision of a tombstone on which was carved an image of the departed, with folded arms, in eternal sleep.” Deryck Cooke called the first of the two themes, introduced by the cello, “a transfigured cradle song.” The motif in the bass evokes the ancient *passacaglia* form, with its variations over a repeating bass line. The oboe introduces the next section with a new, plaintive and lamenting, theme. Variations on each of these two main themes follow, culminating in a coda, with a reference to a theme from the finale of Mahler's “Resurrection” Symphony No. 2, that has been called “the most splendid passage ... of the entire Symphony.”

Having apparently made our way to the gates of heaven at the end of the third movement, heaven itself is entered with the fourth. Here, Mahler turns to a song that he had written almost a decade earlier, in 1892. “Das himmlische Leben” (The Heavenly Life), a depiction a

child's idea of heaven, took its text from an old Bavarian folk song, "Der Himmel hängt voll Geigen" ("Heaven is Hung with Violins"), included in the *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* collection. Mahler considered the song's appearance the culmination of his symphony, or as he put it, "the tapering spire of the edifice." A short orchestral prelude opens the movement, with the soprano then singing the first verse of "Das himmlische Leben." The child imagines what heavenly life is like: "We lead angelic lives, yet have a merry time of it besides." Each of the subsequent verses – depicting a heavenly banquet, the sacrifice of a lamb and an ox for the feast (even heaven is not entirely immune from death), the baking of bread, and the child hearing the ethereal music of the angels – is separated by a reference back to the opening motif of the first movement. The work ends with an orchestral postlude that, starting quietly, gently fades away.

There are two arrangements of the Symphony No. 4 for reduced forces, by Erwin Stein (1921) and Klaus Simon (2007). Simon's, the one employed in this performance, sought, in the arranger's own words, "to adopt Mahler's unmistakable instrumentation to a large extent. I hope that this version will also enable smaller ensembles to realize this most chamber music of all Mahler symphonies."

Program Notes by Chris Morrison