

Masterworks Concert 2 – November 16 & 17, 2017

Sinfonietta No. 1

Heitor Villa-Lobos
1887-1959

Brazilian composer and conductor Heitor Villa-Lobos showed musical talent at a young age. His father, an amateur musician, taught him to play both the cello and clarinet, and he taught himself to play the guitar. After his father's death in 1899 Villa-Lobos began earning a living playing guitar and cello in cafés and movie houses. As a composer he was also mostly self-taught. Between 1905 and 1913 he made numerous expeditions into Brazil's hinterland in order to study the music and folklore of the indigenous population, whose music eventually became the inspiration for much of his own.

In 1918 on a South American tour, pianist Artur Schnabel "discovered" Villa-Lobos, who was already by then well-known in his native Brazil. The following year Schnabel, together with the Brazilian singer Vera Janacopulos, encouraged the composer to visit Europe "to show his accomplishments." The Brazilian House of Representatives granted Villa-Lobos a fellowship for the trip, in gratitude for which he conducted a series of four concerts of his music in the Rio de Janeiro opera house. But the public was indifferent, one critic writing: "Villa-Lobos' admirable effort was useless because he was not born by the Volga River and named Villa-Loboff.."

The European trip finally took place in 1923. Villa-Lobos stayed in Paris until 1930 when he returned to Brazil to take charge of music education in the schools. In 1935 he began traveling continuously and extensively in Europe and the USA, becoming known as South America's most important composer. He composed a vast number of works, in all genres.

The Sinfonietta No. 1, subtitled "In Memory of Mozart," is an early work, composed in 1916. It contains none of the indigenous Brazilian music that plays such an important role in Villa-Lobos' subsequent oeuvre. Villa-Lobos' memorial to Mozart has two musical voices: the first, an imitation of Mozart's style; the second a funeral dirge in which Villa-Lobos "speaks" as the mourner. As such, it is a very different creature from Tchaikovsky's Suite No. 4 ("Mozartiana"), in which Mozart's Russian admirer honors Mozart primarily by imitation. But then, note the difference in the subtitles of the two works.

The outer movements share a bouncy "Classical" theme recalling the scurrying opening to the Overture to *Le nozze de Figaro*, overlaid with a second theme with broad legato – even Romantic – lines. Towards the end of the first movement, a slow beat on the timpani foreshadows the coming dirge.

The second movement, marked *Andante non troppo*, is the heart of the piece, lasting longer than the two outer movements combined. It begins with a brass choir introducing the dirge theme. The dismal mood is interrupted by a Mozartian minuet with a hint of the main theme of the opening movement. The dirge resumes, but at a faster clip, and the two themes wind around each other. It is as if the mourner were reminiscing about his deceased idol.

A new gavotte theme in the winds – again in the style of Mozart – presents a new reminiscence that grows into a passionate orchestral climax. A reprise of all the themes from opening movement concludes the piece.

Clarinet Concerto in A major, K. 622

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
1756-1791

This extraordinary Concerto is Mozart's last completed instrumental piece. It has been without doubt the most popular work ever written for the clarinet and few others have done the instrument more justice. Most of the larger compositions Mozart wrote in the last years of his life were commissions – attempts to raise badly needed cash. The Clarinet Concerto, however, was an exception: Mozart composed it, and the Clarinet Quintet, K. 581, for his friend, the celebrated virtuoso Anton Stadler. What began as a purely musical association between composer and performer became a deep friendship, cemented by their involvement with Vienna's Freemasons. They shared one other trait: neither could hold on to money. Stadler used to borrow relentlessly – often from Mozart, of all people. Fortunately for us, the friendship withstood the strain.

The clarinet was a relative latecomer to Western music; while there is some evidence that both Antonio Vivaldi and George Frederick Handel employed the instrument occasionally, the clarinet did not come into regular use until the second half of the eighteenth century and was in continual evolution. While today's young band students learn on an instrument in B-flat, thereby making it the default instrument, there are more varieties of clarinets – in shape, size and key, than in any other family of instruments.

Until his friendship with Stadler, Mozart had used the instrument sparingly, except in his *Harmoniemusik*, serenades and partitas for wind ensembles used for outdoor entertainment. But by the late 1780s, he included the instrument in his last three piano concerti, his final symphonies and all his major operas composed in Vienna.

Mozart wrote the concerto in its original form for an instrument of Stadler's invention, an extended range clarinet (sometimes called a "basset clarinet"), extending one fourth lower than the standard clarinet. The autograph manuscript, however, was lost and only an adaptation for the regular clarinet, made in 1802 by the original publishers, survived. Since the late 1940s clarinetists have made numerous attempts to reconstruct the original score for the "basset" clarinet, and instrument makers have attempted to recreate the instrument. An increasing number of performers are currently playing the concerto on these extended-range clarinets.

After the traditional orchestral exposition, the voice of the clarinet is seldom still. There is a masterful interplay between soloist and orchestra, as well as an astounding number of themes, most of them introduced by the soloist. The mood is changeable, at times cheerful, as in the opening theme, at others resigned or even sad; the tone rich and languid, by turns – all created by Mozart's unusual choice of secondary themes in the minor mode, rather than the customary major.

The slow second movement is a simple ABA song form, one of Mozart's most poignant, gentle and introspective utterances. The long, irregular phrases create a feeling of emotional tension.

The Rondo finale is in a different mood, harking back to the simplicity and charm of music from Mozart's earlier days and reflecting the happy mood of the opera *The Magic Flute* which he was composing at the time. Of course, there are ample opportunities for the clarinet to show off, but in no way approaching the level of technical fireworks found a generation later in the concertos for clarinet by Carl Maria von Weber, which really put the instrument

through its paces.

Stadler premiered the Concerto in Prague on October 16, 1791, less than two months before the composer's death.

Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
1756-1791

When listening to any popular and well-known piece of music, it is difficult to keep from being lulled into inattention by its sheer familiarity. And while we can never hear a 200-year-old work from the point of view of its original audience, it is useful to pretend, at least, to be hearing it for the first time.

Despite the fact that most modern listeners tend to regard the key of a work as irrelevant, musicians of the Baroque and Classical periods regarded certain keys as possessing specific emotive qualities, or "affects." Minor keys in particular were fraught with emotional significance, and few symphonies in this period were written in minor keys. For Mozart, the key of G minor was the key of extreme pathos. He used it sparingly for some of his most heart-wrenching music: the String Quintet K.516; the Piano Quartet K 478; Pamina's aria "Ach, ich fühl's" from *The Magic Flute*; and, of course, the stormy so-called "Little G minor" Symphony (No. 25) K. 183 written when he was only 17.

Mozart's final three symphonies, nos. 39, 40 and 41, were written over a two-month period in 1788, probably as part of a portfolio of new works destined for a series of summer concerts in Vienna. Unfortunately, we lack any information as to whether the concerts actually took place, much less about their reception. At this point his career was already in decline despite the success of his two great operas *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro* written in collaboration with his brilliant librettist Lorenzo da Ponte. That is not to say that Mozart's music was somehow denigrated or considered no longer pleasing; his published scores were selling briskly and his music was being performed all over Europe. It was almost as if there was a surfeit of Mozart – that he was too well known. And although he was in desperate need of funds to support his lifestyle, his legendary productivity faltered as well.

The three symphonies reflect very different moods, the darkest being that of No. 40. It is almost as if the tragedy of this symphony saw its resolution only in the triumph of No. 41 (nicknamed "The Jupiter," but not by Mozart). Ironically, we know less about the circumstances surrounding this most famous of Mozart's over 600 creations, nor can we extrapolate any specific, solid evidence of how it might have reflected the circumstances of his life or his emotions.

The opening theme of Symphony No. 40, with its hushed, nervous introductory upbeat in the violas, sets the tone of urgency and anxiety that pervades the entire work. The second movement *Andante* is the only movement in a major key. But while it begins serenely enough, it, too, turns dark and intense in the course of its development.

Even the Minuet, usually the most lightweight movement in a Classical symphony, retains the original key and is characterized by a series of phrases ending on successively higher and higher notes, ratcheting up the emotional tension. Restatements of the theme in imitative counterpoint pile on top of each other in their agitation. The Trio, at least, provides an emotional break, however slight.

The theme of the finale is a musical portrayal of hysteria, a shrill arpeggio ending in a sighing appoggiatura, followed by a pounding motive in the orchestra that closes with an echo of the sigh in the lower register. Despite a lyrical second theme, the movement is in constant nervous motion. Finally, Mozart subverts the custom of ending symphonies in minor keys in the major, and stays in G minor to the end. Even Tchaikovsky concluded his morose Fifth Symphony in triumph.

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