

Symphony No. 38 in D major, Prague, K.504

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

When Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart moved from his native, provincial Salzburg to the exciting Austrian capital of Vienna in 1781, he seems to have assumed that the world would be his oyster. This was not to be, however. He met with a good measure of success, to be sure, gaining a following as a virtuoso pianist and as a composer — the latter even in the high-stakes world of musical theater. But Vienna was full of other talented composers, and many of them were more politically savvy than Mozart was, for his genius was often accompanied by an obstreperous streak. The ten years he spent in Vienna (where he would die in 1791) might be characterized as a love-hate relationship, in which Mozart derived important aesthetic sustenance from the city's cultural life but often felt personally underappreciated.

Not so with Prague — which Mozart loved, and which loved him back. Germany, Austria, and Bohemia shared an active cultural exchange in the 18th century. In the balance of cultural trade, Bohemia seems to have been a net exporter: its gifts to the musical world included the flotilla of Czech musicians who elevated Mannheim (in southern Germany) to a mid-century musical center so prominent that its orchestra set the standard to which all others aspired. For all its openness to outsiders, Prague seems not to have attracted immigrants quite so easily. Its welcome mat

was out to Mozart, though, and its music-loving populace was quick to embrace such operas as *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* unconditionally, even when Vienna had put forth a respectful but more guarded reception. Franz Xaver Niemetschek, the composer's early biographer, clarified the difference when recounting the first performances of *Figaro*:

In Vienna ... they slandered him and did their best to belittle his art.... [In Prague] the enthusiasm shown by the public was without precedent; they could not hear it enough.

In 1786 Mozart received an invitation to visit Prague — apparently extended by a coterie of culturally inclined citizens of the city's German-speaking community, well known for its patriotic support of the Austro-Germanic arts. At the beginning of 1787 Mozart, his wife, and a considerable entourage traveled by coach to the Bohemian capital for what would be the closest the composer ever came to a pleasure trip. His musical obligations were few, limited to an evening conducting *Le nozze di Figaro* and a couple of performances as a pianist, during which

In Short

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed: 1786, in Vienna; he entered it into his catalogue of compositions on December 6

World premiere: apparently January 19, 1787, in Prague, Bohemia, the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 27, 1866, Carl Bergmann, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 9, 2003, Lorin Maazel, conductor, in Charlotte, North Carolina

Estimated duration: ca. 29 minutes

he particularly distinguished himself as an improviser.

Mozart also arrived bearing gifts, chief among them the D-major Symphony that he had completed late in 1786 and that would forever have the name of “Prague” attached to it. Mozart led a distinguished orchestra — albeit a small one of about 20 players — in the work’s premiere, which appears to have taken place on January 19, 1787. Years later, in 1808, Niemetschek reported:

the symphonies [Mozart] composed for this occasion are real masterpieces ... full of surprising modulations, and have a quick, fiery gait, so that the very soul is transported to sublime heights. This applies particularly to the Symphony in D major, which remains a favorite in Prague, although it has doubtless been heard a hundred times.

Indeed, this symphony is one of Mozart’s most impressive — in spite of the fact that it has only three movements, rather than the by then traditional four. What’s missing is the Minuet-and-Trio that normally occupies the third movement of a classical symphony. It’s anyone’s guess as to why Mozart decided not to include one, but he more than compensates for its absence by attaching a slow introduction to the opening *Allegro*. Though such introductions are found in the later symphonies of Haydn and in those of Beethoven, they are not much associated with Mozart. In this opening, Mozart seems to be looking ahead to the perplexing chromatic ruminations of *Don Giovanni*, which (as it happens) Prague would giddily idolize within a year.

Instrumentation: pairs of flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, plus timpani and strings.

Listen for ...

Commentators are wont to find both *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte* prefigured in the *Prague* Symphony; but one might just as easily hear reflections of the good-humored wisdom of *Le nozze di Figaro* as the moody introduction gives way to the main stretch of the first movement, where the drama of quiet syncopations gives way to jubilant outbursts from the trumpets and timpani. The spirit of *Figaro* again returns with the concluding *Presto* — and quite directly so, since its main theme is derived from that opera, or in any case relates closely to the fleeting duet between Susanna and Cherubino (Act II, Scene VII) that culminates in the latter leaping from the window of the Countess’s boudoir.



Mozart wrote this movement at about the same time he was completing *Figaro*. Just why he embarked on a stand-alone D-major symphonic *Presto* in the spring of 1786 remains a mystery, but, practical craftsman that he was, Mozart found a use for it later that year and built the rest of his symphony to fit before it.