

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator
The Leni and Peter May Chair

Serenade in C minor for Wind Octet, K. 388/384a

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

It may be difficult to think of this ominous, dark-hued piece as a specimen of a serenade or “night music,” which was almost always of a genial nature, the sort of thing that might serve as the background to any manner of pleasurable evening entertainments. Yet, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart did call it a Serenade originally — or, to be precise, a “Serenada,” as he inscribed it on the autograph score, replacing the original term of “Parthia.”

At about that time Emperor Joseph was entertaining a passion for wind music and accordingly had established as part of his courtly staff a *Harmonie* (wind band) ensemble, consisting of a wind octet. This development seems to have been inspired at least in part by the fact that another Viennese noble, Prince Schwarzenberg, had already established a wind band, and the Emperor felt compelled not to be outdone. Mozart may have composed this piece in the hopes of getting a commission from the Emperor. Another name that has been suggested in connection with this work is a certain Prince Alois Joseph Liechtenstein, a serious musical connoisseur; possibly it was his refined ear that Mozart was hoping to charm with the subtlety of his C-minor Serenade.

On July 27, 1782, Mozart wrote to his father about a piece he was writing that he called *Nacht musique* — “Night Music,” a linguistic equivalent to “serenade,” derived from the Italian *sera*, meaning “evening.” Many scholars believe this is the piece to which he was referring. It was almost certainly written before February 1784, since that is when Mozart started keeping a catalogue of his newly composed works and this serenade isn’t included. (Neither is the

string quintet transcription he made of this piece in 1788, but that is somewhat explained away by the fact that it wasn’t really a newly composed work at that point.)

Its intricacies are many, but they are thrust most obviously to the fore in the third movement, a tour de force of canon with a somewhat angry mien. Mozart takes some liberties with his canon writing here, to be sure, but the “follow-the-leader” effect of canon comes across clearly to the ear, the more so as Mozart deliberately works memorable dissonances into the proceedings. In the minuet proper the canon proceeds between parts at a distance of a measure, usually pitched an octave apart. In the major-key central trio section of this brainy movement, Mozart switches to a different mode of canonic writing: a canon in inversion, with one line reflecting the rising and falling of the other as if in a mirror — when one line goes up, the other goes down, and so on. On the whole, this *Menuetto* seems to prefigure the corresponding movement of Mozart’s famous Symphony No. 40 in G minor (K.550).

Singling out the *Menuetto* is not meant to slight the other movements. The first is beautifully balanced and highly emotive, on the

IN SHORT

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed: probably in July 1782, possibly in late 1783

World premiere: unknown

whole taut and tense. The second is a gracious respite, set in the relative major key of E-flat, and one might say that it is the only movement in the whole piece that is very “serenade-like.” Following the canon-laden *Menuetto*, Mozart offers a finale that, like so much of this piece, defies expectations about how a serenade should sound. Where nearly all serenade finales are light and bubbly, Mozart’s continues the nervous moodiness that pervades this

work. This final movement is cast as a theme with variations, all but one of which maintains the minor key and a sense of seriousness that can verge on the terrifying. And yet, Classicist that he is, Mozart feels compelled to at least pretend that everything leads to a happy ending, and he concludes the movement in the major key and in an upbeat spirit, no matter how convincingly he has proposed a conflicting emotional terrain up until that point.

Serenading in Austria

During his years growing up in Salzburg, Mozart produced an impressive catalogue of outdoorsy serenades and related pieces like nocturnes, cassations, and divertimentos. After his move to Vienna in 1781, nearly all of his explicitly “popular” compositions seem geared more for indoor festivities. It’s not that Vienna lacked for public music-making, which had been cultivated for at least a century. In 1684, for example, the English traveler Edward Browne, in his book *A Brief Account of Some Travels in divers Parts of Europe*, described his experiences in Vienna; he particularly associated the profusion of outdoor music with the musical enthusiasm of the (then) Emperor Leopold I, “which makes so many Musicians in Vienna; for no place abounds more with them; and in the Evening we seldom failed of Musick in the Streets, and at our Windows.” It is possible that Mozart supplied serenades, divertimentos, and the like for outdoor performance in Vienna during the decade he lived there, but these would have been pieces he had composed previously, in his Salzburg years.

View of Vienna by Bernardo Bellotto, ca. 1760

