

# Notes on the Program

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

---

## Selections from *Don Giovanni*

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

#### Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

On July 20, 1782, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who had been living in Vienna for just over a year, wrote to his father back in Salzburg about the many projects that occupied him just then. The chief news was that his opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*) had received its second performance the day before. Although a cabal had been waged against it, there were shouts of “Bravo!” to offset the organized hissing, and he was confident about its success, writing:

At the moment I'm extremely busy. A week from Sunday I have to be done with arranging my opera for wind instruments — otherwise someone else will do it before me — and collect profits instead of me. ... You don't know how difficult it is to arrange an opera for winds — you have to suit the character of each wind instrument, yet not lose the original effect.

In the days before copyright, anybody was free to pillage Mozart's score without paying a cent; if the opera proved as popular as he hoped, considerable profits could be gained from a wind arrangement. On the other hand, he could benefit indirectly even from somebody else's transcription, which might serve as an advertisement to get people to buy tickets to the opera itself. Music for wind ensemble — or *Harmonie*, as the Austrians termed it — was very popular in Vienna at the time. Wind groups strolled the streets playing outdoor serenades, but they had a

place in more formal contexts, too. They were especially associated with the noble houses of Vienna, where groups of eight or nine well-paid wind players regularly graced the formal dinners and garden parties of the city's great families: Esterházy, Schwarzenberg, Lobkowitz, Liechtenstein, and so on. At one point, Mozart hoped this fad might provide ongoing income for him. On January 23, 1782, he wrote to his father:

Well, I want to give you my opinion as to my prospects for permanent income. I have my eye on three sources. ... The first is young Prince Liechtenstein, who would like to collect a wind-instrument band (though he does not yet want it to be known), for which I should write the

---

#### In Short

**Born:** January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

**Died:** December 5, 1791, in Vienna

**Works composed and premiered:**

*Don Giovanni*, 1787; selections perhaps arranged in 1788 by Josef Triebensee (1772–1846), or in any case by the early 1790s; the opera *Don Giovanni* premiered October 29, 1787, at the National Theatre in Prague; wind arrangement premiere unknown. Serenade in C minor for Wind Octet, composed probably in July 1782, possibly in late 1783; premiere unknown

**Estimated durations:** Selections from *Don Giovanni*, ca. 5 minutes; Serenade in C minor, ca. 22 minutes

music. This would not bring in very much it is true, but it would be at least something certain, and I should not sign the contract unless it were to be for life.

His hopes did not materialize. Sometimes original music was written for the windbands of the nobility, but more often the players drew from *Harmonie* transcriptions of popular, up-to-date operas. Composers, arrangers, and copyists derived substantial work from this niche industry, usually producing transcriptions and arrangements in manuscript copies but sometimes having them printed in magazines or in engraved editions. In the late-18th and early-19th centuries, the field was dominated by three figures — Johann Went, Josef Triebensee, and Wenzel Sedlak, who played in various prestigious wind ensembles as well as in theater orchestras. Their relationship was collegial, and they apparently cooperated in divvying up assignments rather than competing against

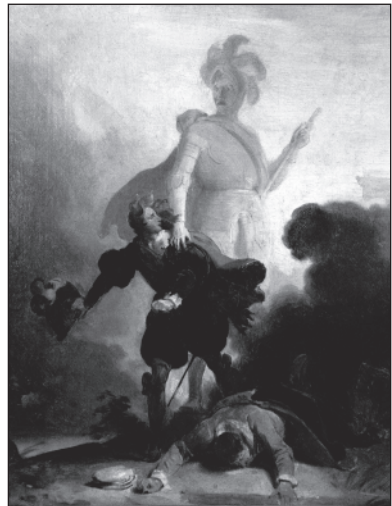
each other. An oboist, Triebensee actually married Went's eldest daughter. He played in the orchestra of the Theater auf der Wieden when *Die Zauberflöte* was premiered and was a founding member of the *Harmonie* formed by Prince Aloys Liechtenstein, for whom he was elevated to become Kapellmeister. Following a succession in the House of Liechtenstein, he assumed the post Carl Maria von Weber vacated as director of the Estates Theatre in Prague. He also composed original works, including a handful of chamber works and a dozen operas.

Triebensee produced a deluge of *Harmonie* transcriptions, mostly from operas and ballets, but also from symphonies and chamber music. He sold many of these through ongoing subscriptions. His *Don Giovanni* transcriptions are not among those subscription offerings, but they circulated in high places all the same, with copies ending up in the collections of Prince Esterházy, Prince Lobkowitz, and the Dutch Royals.

---

## Mozart's *Harmonie* Transcription

If Mozart produced the *Harmonie* transcriptions of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* as he hoped to in 1782, the music has gone missing. But he did compose a bit of *Harmonie* arrangement when he came to write *Don Giovanni* in 1787. In the finale of Act II of that opera, the title character is expecting the arrival of the statue of the slain Commendatore, whom he has invited to be his dinner guest. He begins eating before his guest arrives, and his meal is accompanied by an onstage *Harmonie* ensemble he has assembled, comprising pairs of oboes, clarinets, horns, and bassoons. They make their way through a little suite of “top hits” from recent operas — Vicente Martín y Soler's *Una cosa rara*, Giuseppe Sarti's *Fra due litiganti*, and, to the audience's particular delight, his own *Le nozze di Figaro*, from which he selects the aria “Non più andrai.” On hearing this last, the servant Leporello protests, “Questa poi la conosco pur troppo” [“Now, that tune I know too well”].



Don Giovanni confronting the statue of the Commendatore in a depiction by Alexandre-Évariste Fragonard, ca. 1830

Mozart composed his **Serenade in C minor** (K.388 / 384a) in Vienna in either July 1782 or late 1783. We are beset by confusion about the chronology. 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 the term “serenade,” perhaps derived from the Italian word *sera*, meaning “evening.” (The Latin *serenus*, meaning “serene,” seems to be its ultimate ancestor.) 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 in it. (Neither is the string-quintet transcription he made of this piece in 1788, but that is somewhat explained by the fact that it wasn’t really newly composed at that point.)

It is 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, something that might serve as the background to pleasurable evening entertainments. Yet Mozart did call it a Serenade originally — or, to be precise, a “Serenada,” as he inscribed it on the autograph score. At about that time, Habsburg Emperor Joseph II was entertaining a passion for wind music and established as part of his court staff a *Harmonie* (wind band) ensemble consisting of a wind octet. He 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 hoping to get a commission from the Emperor.

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 by 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. In certain aspects, this *Menuetto* prefigures 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 whole taut and tense. The second is a gracious respite, set in the relative major key of E-flat; 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 upheld a conflicting emotional terrain up to that point.

