

Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K.550

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's biography contains such an amazing procession of extraordinary experiences and achievements that it reads almost like an 18th-century novel. One might think it was all made up — but then, of course, there's the inescapable evidence that he did live and breathe and write music unlike anything produced before, during, or after his lifetime. The story of his final three symphonies occupies a full chapter near the end of this life-as-novel. A full 230 years after they were written, these works — Mozart's Symphonies No. 39 in E-flat major, No. 40 in G minor, and No. 41 in C major (*Jupiter*) — continue to stand at the summit of the symphonic repertoire, where they keep company with a small and supremely select group of fellow masterpieces by A-list composers.

Nonetheless, Mozart seems to have scarcely broken a sweat in writing them. Incredibly, all three were produced in the space of about nine weeks, in the summer of 1788. He likely began writing the Symphony No. 39 around the beginning of June, not quite a month after *Don Giovanni* was granted a lukewarm reception at its Vienna premiere. In any case, there is no question that he finished it on June 26, and that he went on to complete the succeeding symphonies on July 25 and August 10. Each is a very full-scale work; unlike the three-movement Symphony No. 38 (*Prague*), which Mozart had written two years earlier, they comprise the standard four movements of the late Classical symphony. Twelve movements in nine weeks would mean that, on the average, Mozart expended five days and a few hours on the composition of each. Of course, that doesn't figure in the fact that he was writing other pieces at the same time, or that he was also giving piano lessons, tending a sick wife, enduring the

death of a six-month-old daughter, entertaining friends, moving to a new apartment, and begging his fellow freemason Michael Puchberg for financial assistance.

In one of his letters to Puchberg, Mozart mentioned that he had hopes for some income from two concerts that were to be performed in the Vienna Casino the following week. However, none of the city's newspapers made mention of the performances, and it seems probable that they were cancelled. A 2011 article by the musicologist Milada Jonášová introduced a newly discovered period document revealing that the Symphony No. 40 was played in a concert under the patronage of Mozart's friend Baron Gottfried van Swieten. This is the only one of Mozart's three last symphonies known to have been performed during his lifetime. It certainly figured on a program given twice in Vienna — on April 16–17, 1791 — when it was conducted by Antonio Salieri, who had been named Kapellmeister of the Vienna Court in 1788.

IN SHORT

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed: Between June 26 and July 25, 1788

World premiere: unknown. Antonio Salieri conducted the Symphony No. 40 at the Burgtheater in Vienna on April 16–17, 1791, with instrumentation slightly revised from the original version.

New York Philharmonic premiere; April 25, 1846, Henry C. Timm, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 30, 2013, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 30 minutes

These three symphonies have been minutely analyzed over the years, and they have proven so rich in their structural details that the analytical conversation continues at full force to this day. Still, words come with difficulty when one tries to discuss Mozart's final symphonies. One can dissect their harmonic structures, their deployment of themes, their contrapuntal subtlety, and the mastery of their instrumentation and yet fail to convey the exceptionally well-wrought personalities that each makes evident even at first hearing. Each is sublimely beautiful, but each elicits a very different response. Symphony No. 40 is a work of Sturm und Drang, a score whose overriding emotions

range from the quirky to the unsettling and on to the downright terrifying, perhaps mirroring Mozart's inner demons. It links the sentiments of the 18th century to those of the 19th; it therefore comes as no surprise to learn that it was one of the rather few large-scale works by Mozart to remain steadfastly in the repertoire throughout the Romantic era.

Instrumentation: originally scored for flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings; the composer later added a pair of clarinets (revising the oboe parts to interlace with them) and made a few other adjustments to the orchestration. That revised version, with clarinets, is used in this performance.

The Salieri Connection

Mozart's Symphony No. 40 figured on a program of April 16–17, 1791, in Vienna, conducted by the distinguished Antonio Salieri, Kapellmeister of the Vienna Court. To many music lovers the mention of Salieri inevitably brings to mind the stories that make him complicit in Mozart's death, myths that proved potent to Romantic imaginations of the 19th century and that fueled Peter Shaffer's marvelous play *Amadeus* (which, from the moment it was premiered in 1979, people have had trouble remembering is a work of fiction).

It would be hard to find a reputable historian today who thinks the legend that Salieri committed murder anything less than preposterous, although Mozart could be suspicious of Salieri, and several of his letters underscore that he felt the composer sometimes tried to undermine his endeavors. Whether or not his suspicions were well founded, things had gotten onto a more collegial track by 1791. Six months after Salieri conducted the G-minor Symphony, he accompanied Mozart to a performance of the latter's newly unveiled opera, *The Magic Flute*, to which he reacted with demonstrative enthusiasm. Following Mozart's tragically early death, almost certainly the result of rheumatic inflammatory fever (or "military fever," as it was known at the time), the composer's widow sent their elder son, Franz Xaver, to take music lessons from Salieri.



The rival? F. Murray Abraham as Antonio Salieri in the 1984 film based on Peter Shaffer's play