

ASO Program Notes

Symphony No. 40 in G minor

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

Historians tell us that No. 40 is one of three symphonies Mozart composed during a two month period in 1788, toward the end of his life. He was writing obsessively, desperately trying to obtain funds to support his lifestyle. His circumstances were indeed grim. He was on the verge of poverty, his popularity with the Viennese public was fading and his marriage was strained. His writing was as brilliant and pleasing as ever, and Europe was flooded with his music, but it was exactly this abundance that may have led his audience to cool somewhat toward him, and to look elsewhere for entertainment. In his very short life he had composed a remarkable 41 symphonies. If one broadens the definition of “symphony” he may have composed as many as 71, along with numerous other works.

The Symphony No. 40 is one of only two composed in a minor key. Listeners in Mozart’s day regarded certain keys as closely connected to mood or emotion. Somber feelings were attributed to minor keys in particular, and very few works at that time were written in minor keys. The key of G minor was full of pathos, and Mozart used it only for his most heart-wrenching work. Modern critics have called the first and last movements of Symphony No. 40 “plunges into the abyss of the soul,” and the entire work a “supreme expression of suffering and terror.” In a letter to a friend at this time, in which he begs for a loan, he says, “Black thoughts...often come to me, thoughts I push away with a tremendous effort.” There is much disagreement among critics as to Mozart’s emotional state while composing No. 40, but it is certainly the darkest of the three symphonies written that summer. There is no record of its first performance, but there are posters which show it having been performed on April 17, 1791 and conducted by Antonio Salieri.

The opening theme, in sonata form, sets a tone of urgency that carries through the entire work. The second movement is in a major key, beginning serenely, then turning darker and more intense as it progresses before returning to a more gentle atmosphere. Even the Minuet, traditionally lighter in character, also tends to increase the tension of the work, and the final movement returns to the sonata form, although with some modification. The anxiety of the first movement descends into profound unease and almost violent hysteria in the Finale, and Mozart maintains the G minor key to the end.

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