

## PROGRAM NOTES

VPR Broadcast Wednesday, August 26, 2020, 6:00 PM Eastern

### **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**

Serenade No. 10 for winds in B-flat, K. 361/370a (*Gran Partita*) (1781)

Anyone who has seen Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* remembers the unforgettable moment when Antonio Salieri first inspects his rival Mozart's manuscripts and hears the sounds of heaven in his mind's ear:

*On the page it looked nothing. The beginning simple, almost comic. Just a pulse. Bassoons and basset horns, like a rusty squeezebox. And then suddenly, high above it, an oboe. A single note, hanging there, unwavering. Until a clarinet took over and sweetened it into a phrase of such delight! This was no composition by a performing monkey! This was a music I'd never heard. Filled with such longing, such unfulfillable longing, it had me trembling. It seemed to me that I was hearing the voice of God.*

Salieri is looking at the Adagio from Mozart's Serenade No. 10 in B-flat for thirteen instruments, later designated the *Gran Partita* on the score by an unknown contributor. Calling it (loosely) a "grand suite" is an appropriate description for this music, composed to entertain more than provoke, and with incomparable beauty and integrity of craft. Shaffer puts his finger on one thing that makes Mozart's music unique: a sophistication and elegance in writing that sounds like an effortless dictation taken from some higher power directly onto the composer's page.

The Western practice of wind ensemble performance goes back to at least the fifteenth century, when Renaissance wind bands were popular alternatives to group singing. As these ensembles tended to perform for a wider public than music played in church settings, much of their repertoire was dances and marches. The *Gran Partita*, with its own dances and marches feels like a distant descendant of that early instrumental music, but with an evolved sensibility, at once courtly, martial, lilting... earthly and divine.

The genre of *Harmoniemusik* (a term applied to a wide range of music for winds starting in the 18th century – from large military ensembles to street bands) emerged as a trend in Mozart's time. No doubt this renewed interest in wind music figured in the birth of the *Gran Partita*, which could serve to feature the principal players in a royal orchestra for an evening of *Harmoniemusik*. That Mozart calls his work a Serenade underscores his intent to amuse and entertain, as a Serenade was to be performed outdoors and at night, often to welcome guests of stature and renown.

Mozart was known in his time for being an excellent writer for winds, though the *Gran Partita* isn't scored only for that class of instrument. He originally wrote for a double bass in the ensemble, though for continuity of instrumentation, some performances replace it with the contrabassoon (an extremely

rare instrument in Mozart's time, and still rarely used today). The double bass gives the warmth of string sound to the coolness of the wind sonorities and shape to the overall texture of the ensemble.

The first movement of the *Serenade No. 10 in B-flat* begins with a majestic *Largo* introduction, the instruments playing the stately chords of a grand overture. But we get a sense of what's to come in the lively and upbeat sonata form that follows. The second movement continues with a march-like minuet and trio in several sections, the rich harmonies of the minuet in contrast with the little clarinet duet of the first trio. Already after the second trio the listener has experienced the breadth of Mozart's invention, capricious spirit, and full mastery of every musical dimension.

The third movement *Adagio* is heralded by horns and bass instruments followed immediately by that glorious "squeezebox." To add to Shaffer's words from *Amadeus* would be superfluous, but suffice it to say this is Mozart at his most lyrical, passing one dovetailed line to the next between instruments. It is an unapologetic ballade, a song for whom or about what, no one knows. There is some speculation that Mozart wrote the piece as a wedding gift for his wife Constanze, but this has never amounted to anything more than speculation (on sentiment alone, however, this movement is as good evidence as any).

A shorter minuet and trio similar in content to the second movement follows as the minuet marches even more determinedly to its trio, which is a bit darker character than its predecessors. The fifth movement *Romanza* is another lyrical and melodic slow movement, a bit more sedate than the third, and containing a fast and resolved inner section.

The sixth movement is a *Theme with Six Variations* and could stand as a piece on its own right. After a simple introduction, Mozart gets to work reshaping, resetting, and reinterpreting the theme into every variety of statement he can, fit into six compelling variations that highlight individual instruments as both soloists and accompanists. This impressive display of compositional virtuosity gives way to a brief but raucous finale, like a final operatic number with the full cast on stage to sum it all up in a bright and optimistic farewell after a long journey together.

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## **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**

### **String Quintet in C, K. 515 (1787)**

Mozart wrote six viola quintets (the instruments in a string quartet plus viola) that are widely regarded to be some of the most outstanding works of the chamber music repertoire. He composed his first quintet, K. 174 as a teenager in 1773 and waited almost fifteen years before writing five more in near succession approaching the end of his life. His C major quintet, K. 515 represents Mozart's return to the medium after this long hiatus, and it shows the miraculous growth of an artistic voice that seems born already fully formed.

Two of the subsequent quintets, the C major K. 515 and g minor K. 516 were written back to back as complements to each other in 1787. One wonders how Mozart, on returning to the ensemble again with the C major after so many years would have reflected on his earlier youthful work.

The *C Major Quintet K. 515* is an expansive piece, significantly longer than K. 174 at just over thirty-five minutes, and it pushes even further on musical boundaries as the work of an artist at the height of his powers. Mozart wrote the C major in the middle of composing *Don Giovanni* and the quintet has all of the dramatic qualities of so many of his great operas: an expansive *Allegro* first act to establish the story, an *Andante* with the most lyrical and intimate aria singing, the *Menuetto: Allegretto* of mistaken identities and playful intrigue, and an *Allegro* like a final scene where all of the characters get married and live happily ever after.

Between Mozart's first extraordinary attempt at the viola quintet and the beginning of an unprecedented run of five more he wrote a prodigious body of repertoire, yet the composer's artistic identity has a striking consistency across the years of output. Like the greatest composers, poets, painters, and sculptors — all creative artists — the artist's personality persists through Mozart's very earliest and latest works. That he left these iconic quintets for us is one of the great gifts to chamber music lovers — we can only protest that Mozart didn't live longer to bring us more.

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## **JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)**

### **Horn Trio in E-flat, op. 40 (1865)**

Franz Josef Haydn is remembered as the “Father of the String Quartet”; the mixed instrumental groups known as the Pierrot Ensembles derive their name from Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, which introduced the now-ubiquitous combination. For the horn trio, that forefather is Johannes Brahms, whose *Horn Trio in E-flat*, remains both the trailblazer and the titan of the genre. Despite the Brahms *Horn Trio's* treasured place in the canon, relatively few other composers have tried to write a successor to it (even fewer have succeeded — György Ligeti's *Horn Trio*, fittingly subtitled *Hommage à Brahms*, is a notable exception.) This could perhaps be due to the unique sonic issues posed by the ensemble. The horn, far more familiar as the powerhouse of the symphony orchestra, can easily overpower the comparatively delicate and nimble violin. Brahms masterfully walks this instrumental tightrope, integrating both the horn's bombastic nature and tenderness into what is essentially a modified piano trio. But beyond this feat of compositional prowess, this instrumental combination had much deeper resonance for Brahms.

In February of 1865, Brahms's mother, Christiane, with whom he was particularly close, passed away; her death looms large over the two works Brahms wrote that year, the massive *Ein Deutsches Requiem* and the horn trio. The trio's unusual instrumentation is just one of the ways that Brahms's memories haunt the piece: Brahms had played horn in his youth, along with piano and cello. However, the type of horn that Brahms had grown up playing had gone out of fashion by the 1860's, replaced by more technologically advanced valve horns, which allowed musicians to play fluently and with consistent tone in any key. Brahms specifically wrote his trio with the older *Waldhorn*, or natural horn, in mind. He was skeptical of the newer valve (or French) horns, insisting that without the idiosyncrasies of the natural horn, “the piano and violin are not obliged to adapt themselves to [the horn], and the tone is rough from the beginning.” The classical music world ultimately favored the valve horn, and performances of the horn trio have reflected that shift. Nonetheless, vestiges of Brahms's original conception can still be heard in his treatment of melody and instrumental color, particularly in his juxtaposition of distant keys, which would have resulted in an entirely different sound quality on natural horn.

The first movement of the trio is most notable for what it's not, namely, the requisite sonata-allegro form, a convention that the musically conservative Brahms typically honored. Instead, the first movement is a slow rondo, alternating between two musical statements. The movement begins with a deceptively simple song in the major mode, marked *Andante*, with slow offbeat accompaniments. Though the accompaniment becomes more animated as the theme unfolds, the music never loses its stately nature. This is contrasted with two minor-mode sections that are as roiling and rhapsodic as the opening is lyrical. The second movement is a buoyant scherzo in 6/8, juxtaposing a straightforward theme in E-flat major with bombastic duple-meter interruptions, constantly playing with the audience's perception of meter. The scherzo bookends a surprisingly somber trio in A flat minor, a striking choice that connects the otherwise exuberant movement to the trio's elegiac soundworld.

The third movement is given the unusual tempo marking *Adagio Mesto*, translating to "slowly and mournfully." This movement is the emotional core of the trio, and the one in which Brahms's grief is most bare. The movement opens with a slowly rocking piano lament, followed by a sorrowful lullaby played by the violin and horn. The B-section consists of a stark, modal fugue, another distinct nod to the past, before returning to the A-material. Afterwards, when the fugal material returns, it has been transfigured into a horn call, which builds into an impassioned major-mode variation of the A-theme, joined by a soaring piano accompaniment. It is generally believed that the material is derived from a Rhenish folk song that Brahms's mother would have taught him, *In den Weiden steht ein Haus*; its inclusion is a touching undercurrent to an already poignant movement. The fourth movement is a joyous allegro, recalling the scherzo in both key and meter. Once again, Brahms surprises the audience formally: instead of the expected rondo, the finale is in the sonata-allegro form "missing" from the first movement. The movement evokes the horn's hunting roots through its closely knit imitation, rollicking rhythm, and liberal use of horn calls, before ending in a triumphant E-flat major.