

Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik Program Notes

Le Tombeau de Couperin

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

Composed in 1917 for piano; orchestrated in 1920.

Premiered on February 28, 1920 in Paris, conducted by Rhené-Baton.

Ravel was tormented by the First World War. He was accepted into the armed forces despite his small stature and delicate health, but his physical constitution was not robust enough to withstand the rigors of combat and he was quickly discharged for medical reasons. Soon after he arrived home, his beloved mother lapsed into her final illness, and the shock of her death nearly prostrated him. His own failed health, his mental anguish over the War, and the loss of his mother kept him from doing much creative work during World War I. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is his only important work of those difficult years.

The inspiration for *Le Tombeau* came from two obsessions that filled Ravel's mind in 1917 — the sorrow caused by the War and the need to retain the sanity represented by the tradition of French culture. In the piano suite that was the first version of *Le Tombeau*, each of the movements was dedicated to one of six friends of the composer who had fallen on the battlefield, a musical memorial to his countrymen and, perhaps, to his late mother as well. In a similar way, composers of the French Baroque age, François Couperin (1668-1733) among them, paid tribute in music to recently deceased colleagues. Such a piece was called a “*tombeau*,” literally a “tomb,” and Ravel intended such an association here. Beside just a way of eulogizing his comrades, however, the association with Couperin also represented for Ravel the continuity of the logic and refinement of French civilization. It was in this great Gallic tradition that Ravel sought intellectual and emotional shelter from crushing contemporary events. The title of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, therefore, has a triple meaning: it is a memorial to family and close friends; it is a revival of some aspects of the musical style of the French Baroque; and, probably most significant for Ravel, it is a continuation of the venerable tradition of French culture and thought in a time of despair and nihilism.

Despite its heavy burden of associations, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* displays little of Ravel's distraught mental state, especially in its effervescent orchestral version. Rather than a roiling, emotional document, *Le Tombeau* is a vision of the refined and elegant world of Versailles shimmering in retrospect through the medium of the dance, its most characteristic social manifestation. The succulently atmospheric orchestration and rich harmony clearly mark the modern origin of the work, but its buoyant rhythms and crystalline structure show the influence of the music of Couperin's age. “This suite is a garland of musical flowers,” wrote Donald N. Ferguson, “grown from 17th-century seed in a 20th-century hothouse.”

The gossamer *Prélude* contains some dazzling passages for the woodwinds led by the oboe. The *Forlane* is based on a dance of Italian origin popular among the Venetian gondoliers before it crossed the Alps into France. The *Menuet* is the most durable of all Baroque dances. The *Rigaudon* is a vigorous duple-meter dance that originated in Provence.

***Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (Serenade No. 13 in G major), K. 525**
WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Composed in 1787.

Eine kleine Nachtmusik is at once one of the most familiar yet one of the most mysterious of Mozart's works. He dated the completed manuscript on August 10, 1787, the day on which he entered it into his catalog of compositions as "Eine kleine Nachtmusik, bestehend in einem [consisting of an] Allegro, Menuett und Trio — Romance, Menuett und Trio, Finale. 2 Violini, Viola e Bassi." There is no other contemporary record of the work's provenance, composition or performance. It was the first work of the serenade type that he had written since the magnificent C minor Wind Octet (K. 388) of 1782, and it seems unlikely that, at a time when he was increasingly mired in debt, he would have returned to the genre without some promise of payment. Indeed, he had to set aside his furious preparations for the October premiere of *Don Giovanni* in Prague to compose the piece. (The eventful year 1787 also saw Mozart's meeting with Beethoven — "He will soon make a noise in the world," Mozart prophesied — as well as the aborted plans to move to England with his friends, the Storaces and Michael Kelly, and the death of his father.) The simple, transparent style of *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, reminiscent of the music of Mozart's Salzburg years and so different from the rich expression of all his later music except for the dances he wrote for the Habsburg court balls, suggests that it was designed for amateur performance, perhaps at the request of some aristocratic Viennese player of limited musical ability. The word "bassi" in the catalog entry implies that it was conceived for a quintet of strings (in its 18th-century context, "bassi" meant cellos doubled by basses) or for a small string orchestra, but there is not a scrap of further evidence concerning the piece, and Mozart's exact intentions as to its performing forces will probably remain forever unknown.

As to the formal type of *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, John N. Burk said it is "unclassifiable." Burk noted that it was included among the string quartets in Ludwig Köchel's catalog and in the Breitkopf und Härtel edition of Mozart's works, "but it has nothing in common with Mozart's intricate quartet writing at that time." The titular word "Nachtmusik" — "night music" or *Notturmo* — would seem to place it among the various genres of 18th-century entertainment music, as would the five movements specified by Mozart's catalog entry. The fifth movement, a minuet and trio originally placed between the opening *Allegro* and the *Romanza*, has completely disappeared. The autograph manuscript consists of eight leaves clearly numbered one to eight, but the third page has been torn from the small volume — by Mozart? by a souvenir hunter? by an editor? (the piece was unpublished until 1827). Alfred Einstein guessed that the minuet was transferred to the partly spurious Clavier Sonata, K. Anhang (=appendix, in German) 136, but offers no evidence.

Eine kleine Nachtmusik is an enigma, a wonderful, isolated chronological and stylistic aberration of Mozart's mature years that raises to perfection the simple musical gestures of his boyhood. Was it a piece, like the courtly dances, that he tossed off so quickly he did not have time to invest it with any complexities? Did his patron (Mozart never composed any other of his serenades without a definite commission) require something without the incipient Romanticisms that were the composer's growing obsession? Was it some kind of nostalgic tonal reminiscence of the bright days of his youth — a kind of

memorial to his father, dead only three months? Unanswerable questions, these, yet not without some bearing on the perception of this familiar music. Though sunny and cheerful throughout, when seen in the light of its immediate musical companions of 1787 — *Don Giovanni*, the A major Violin Sonata (K. 526) and the C major and G minor String Quintets (K. 515 and 516) — *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* takes on an added depth of expression as much for what it eschews as for what it contains.

Bassoon Concerto in B-flat major, K. 191 (K. 186e)

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Composed in 1774.

Word reached Salzburg in early summer 1773 that Florian Gassmann, court music director in Vienna, had fallen seriously ill. Papa Leopold Mozart thought that his son, Wolfgang, would make a splendid replacement for the ailing Gassmann, and the two went to Vienna in July to carry the suggestion to Empress Maria Theresa. Maria, who had bounced the child Mozart on her knee when he visited Schönbrunn Palace a decade earlier to play for her, did not find the no-longer-boyish Mozart suitable for the position, and the disappointed Mozarts left Vienna several weeks later. Even if it failed to produce a new job, however, the trip proved to be an important milestone in the musical development of the young composer.

In 1773, Vienna was the home of some of the 18th century's most notable musicians. Hasse, Gluck, Gassmann, Wagenseil, Salieri, Haydn, Dittersdorf, Vanhal and several others made Vienna the greatest city of music in the 18th-century world. Mozart reveled in the expanded expressive possibilities presented by the works of this sterling aggregation during his stay there, especially the recent quartets (Op. 20, with their fugal finales) and symphonies ("Mourning," "Farewell," "La Passione") of Joseph Haydn. Mozart carried with him the excitement of this new music when he returned to Salzburg in late September, and incorporated its innovations into some of his works of the following months, notably a set of four symphonies, including the "Little" G minor (No. 25, K. 183) and the A major (No. 29, K. 201). December 1773 also saw the composition of his first original piano concerto (K. 175), his four earlier efforts in the genre having been transcriptions of music by various now-forgotten composers. The following spring he undertook the first of his wind concertos, completing the specimen for bassoon on June 4, 1774. The player and the occasion for which the work was written are unknown, though, in that day of musical pragmatism, it was almost certainly intended for immediate performance, probably by one of Mozart's fellow musicians in the archiepiscopal orchestra. It was thought for some time that this Concerto might have been written for Baron Thadeus von Dürnitz, an amateur player of the instrument, but Mozart did not meet him until the autumn of 1774, when he was in Munich preparing for the premiere of his opera *La finta giardiniera*. There is reference in the correspondence to three bassoon concertos composed for Dürnitz, but the only extant work directly attributable to this commission is the happy little Duo Sonata for Bassoon and Violoncello in B-flat major (K. 292/K. 196c). Whatever its provenance, the Bassoon Concerto is among the first works of Mozart's maturity, filled with the elegant grace, boundless invention and refined sensitivity that mark his finest music.

Mozart's skill as an orchestrator — his ability to write music exactly suited to a particular instrument and blend it with the surrounding sonorities — is too often overlooked. His mastery of this technique is

especially evident in the wind concertos, where the characteristics and limitations of the individual instruments seem to have freed rather than fettered his creativity. Concerning the Bassoon Concerto, John N. Burk pointed out that “the tonal allurements of the instrument, its best leaps and turns, its guttural velvet, are skillfully brought forth. Mozart puts the instrument most gratefully through its paces.” Burk’s observation is borne out by the compact opening movement, one of Mozart’s flawless sonata-concerto constructions. So closely is this music bound to the specific nature of the bassoon that repeated attempts to transcribe it for cello, which could easily negotiate its range and technical demands but for which Mozart left no solo works, have been consistently unsuccessful. The *Andante* is a lovely, wordless song, or, more appropriately, an aria, whose opening melodic gesture was to reappear in “Porgi amor” from *The Marriage of Figaro* a dozen years later. The closing movement is a clever hybrid of rondo and variations given in the meter and manner of a minuet.

Symphony in Three Movements

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

Composed in 1942-1945.

Premiered on January 24, 1946 in New York, conducted by the composer.

Stravinsky once said that “every good piece of music is marked by its own characteristic sound.” Certainly this is true of his own work, perhaps more so than with that of any other composer. *The Firebird*, *The Soldier’s Tale*, the *Symphony of Psalms*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Les Noces*, *The Rake’s Progress*, the *Movements for Piano and Orchestra*: each creates its own unique universe of sound, its own distinctive congeries of orchestration, harmony, texture. The essential “sound world” of the *Symphony in Three Movements* is one of ferocity — brilliant, steely, forceful, brass-driven — and, extremely rare for Stravinsky in his instrumental works, it seems to have arisen from a programmatic engine that was driving his creativity at the time of the work’s composition.

Stravinsky spoke and wrote a great deal during his lifetime, and one of the threads upon which he consistently hung his thoughts was the philosophy that “music means nothing,” that a musical composition is merely notes and timbres carefully placed one after another by the composer, and that the emotion incited by it originates with the listener and not with the artist. “Rhythm and motion, not the element of feeling, are the foundations of musical art,” he insisted. Such a view inherently precludes music with programmatic reference, but Stravinsky himself admitted that even he sometimes slipped from his Apollonian ideal. A passage of energetic triplet rhythms in the finale of the *Symphony of Psalms*, he said, represented the flying hooves of the horses pulling Elijah’s chariot to heaven. Of the *Symphony in Three Movements*, composed during the agonizing and uncertain days of the Second World War, soon after he had settled in California, Stravinsky wrote, “During the process of creation in this, our arduous time of sharp and shifting events, of despair and hope, of continual torments, of tension and, at last, cessation and relief, it may be that all of those repercussions have left traces in the Symphony.... It both does and does not ‘express my feelings’ about them [i.e., the events of the War], but I prefer to say only that, without participation of what I think of as my will, they excited my musical imagination. And the events that thus activated me were not general, or ideological, but specific: each episode in the Symphony is linked in my imagination with a concrete impression, very often cinematic in origin, of the War.”

The *Symphony in Three Movements* came into existence, as it were, in pieces, and over a considerable period of time. The composer Alexander Tansman, Stravinsky's close friend and eventual biographer, said that the first movement originated in 1942 as an orchestral piece with a prominent *concertante* piano part, not dissimilar from the way *Petrushka* had evolved thirty years before. The piano, however, had largely been subsumed into the orchestral texture by the time the movement was completed before the end of the year. The music for the *Andante*, composed during the spring of 1943, was first intended for use in the score of a film based on Franz Werfel's novel *The Song of Bernadette*. Stravinsky said that the music was to accompany the vision of the Virgin Mary which miraculously appeared to the 19th-century peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous in the town of Lourdes, though its icy insouciance seems little related to the mood of that event, except for the prominence of its harp part. At any rate, Stravinsky withdrew from the project for artistic and financial reasons (as he did from every other movie deal proposed to him during the years he lived in Hollywood), and the music, like the eventual first movement of the Symphony, remained an as-yet dissociated fragment. (*The Song of Bernadette*, incidentally, was made into an enormously successful if rather syrupy film in 1943 by director Henry King. It won four Oscars, including one for Jennifer Jones as Best Actress and one for Alfred Newman, who supplied the music.) The spur to pull these musical orphans together into a finished symphony came with a commission from the New York Philharmonic in 1945. Stravinsky composed a third movement, which brought together the piano and harp featured in the two existing pieces, and completed the *Symphony in Three Movements* on August 7, 1945, just one week before the Japanese surrender ended the War. He conducted its premiere in New York on January 24, 1946. It was his first new work to be heard after he became a naturalized United States citizen on December 28, 1945.

The first movement, Stravinsky said, "was inspired by a war film, a documentary of scorched-earth tactics in China. The middle part of the movement — the music for clarinet, piano and strings, which mounts in intensity and volume until the explosion of the three chords [from the full orchestra] — was conceived as a series of instrumental conversations to accompany a cinematographic scene showing the Chinese people scratching and digging in their fields." The movement (whose tempo is indicated by an exact metronome marking rather than by the usual descriptive, but less precise, Italian word, a common practice with this composer) combines the tightly reasoned thematic development and balanced returns of traditional sonata-allegro form with Stravinsky's accustomed mosaic procedure of juxtaposing unrelated blocks of music. It is perhaps the most ingenious, challenging and masterful formal exercise that he ever executed, and yields up its essential matter only with repeated hearings. Three motivic signposts, however, can serve as immediate points of reference: a sweeping scale hurled forth in the opening measure; violent, hammered chords played by the violins above a motoric bass ostinato; and a mechanical, repeated-note figure in the horns. These three musical kernels are separated by much other thematic material, but are clearly recalled in the closing pages to round out the movement, in the manner of sonata-allegro form. Midway through the movement, attentive listeners may detect a phrase that Stravinsky may (or may not) have quoted from the "cat" theme of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* of 1936. It is not used as a thematic springboard, but is simply woven into the ongoing texture, a technique that Shostakovich later used to incorporate the trumpet melody from Rossini's *William Tell Overture* into the first movement of his Fifteenth Symphony.

The *Andante*, given its association with *The Song of Bernadette* and its prominent part for the harp, is a

halcyon respite from the intensity of the surrounding movements. It is structured in Classical three-part form: a repeated-note melody in the strings, perhaps sprung from the opening number of the second act of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, informs the first and third sections of the movement; an austere passage, initiated by flute and harp and framed by shimmering chords floating in the high register of strings (before) and woodwinds (after), stands at the center. The movement is connected directly to the finale by a brief, chordal Interlude.

“The third movement actually contains the genesis of a war plot, though I recognized it as such only after completing the composition,” Stravinsky continued. “The beginning of the movement is ... a musical reaction to the newsreels and documentaries that I had seen of goose-stepping soldiers. The square march-beat, the brass-band instrumentation, the grotesque *crescendo* in the tuba — these are all related to those repellent pictures. The march music is predominant until the fugue [begun in fragmentary manner by the piano and solo trombone], which is the stasis and the turning point. [It is here that the piano and the harp, each of which has had a movement to itself, are heard together by themselves for the first time.] The immobility at the beginning of the fugue is comic, I think — and so, to me, was the overturned arrogance of the Germans when their machine failed. The exposition of the fugue and the end of the Symphony are associated in my plot with the rise of the Allies, and perhaps the final, albeit rather too commercial, chord tokens my extra exuberance in the Allied triumph.”

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