

Understanding Music

Seventh Edition

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

I pay no attention whatever to anybody's praise or blame. . . . I simply follow my own feelings.

—Mozart, in a letter to his father

I swear before Almighty God that your son is the greatest composer I know either in person or by reputation.

—Haydn to Mozart's Father

Find the **Quick Listen** on **MySearchLab**
"Mozart First Symphony"

For most listeners, Mozart's music is easier to appreciate than Haydn's. Compared with Haydn, Mozart wears his heart on his sleeve. His music is even more colorful, more intense.

Mozart was born into a musical family. His father, Leopold, was a distinguished violinist and composer who held the post of deputy music director at the court of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg in Austria. He was also the author of an important book on violin playing. Mozart's older sister was also a talented musician, though she did not pursue a life in music, as this was considered inappropriate for women at the time. Mozart's father decided to devote his career to promoting the abilities of young Wolfgang. Wolfgang was uniquely, breathtakingly gifted. His father piously referred to him as "this miracle God has caused to be born in Salzburg."

Mozart was born in 1756. By the age of four, he was already displaying amazing musical ability. At six, he had started to compose and was performing brilliantly on the harpsichord. For the next 10 years, his father took him on journeys to various courts, towns, and principalities around Europe where he played



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

for noblemen, princes, and even the Empress of Austria Maria Theresa.

These constant travels in his formative years had a valuable effect on the young boy. Mozart's principal teacher at this time was his father, but he absorbed other musical influences like a sponge. Wherever he went, he picked up the musical style of the region and of the prominent local composers.

LEOPOLD MOZART

Leopold Mozart is often mentioned only in relation to his illustrious son, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. This is a little unfair, because he was a distinguished performer, composer, author, and music theorist in his own right.

In 1756, Leopold published a treatise entitled *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule* (*Essay on a Fundamental Violin Method*), designed partly as an aid for teaching the violin and partly as a discussion of musical performance and analysis. This treatise represents one of the most important contributions to music theory in the mid-eighteenth century.

Unfortunately, a large number of Leopold's compositions remain unresearched, uncatalogued, and unpublished. Those that are documented include Masses, symphonies, divertimenti, partitas, serenades, and a wide variety of chamber music. Much of Leopold's music exhibits a strong naturalistic tendency and employs instruments such as bugles, bagpipes, the hunting horn, the hurdy-gurdy, and the dulcimer. His scores sometimes call for dog noises, human cries, pistol shots, and whistles!

Leopold composed little after 1762. This sudden decrease in productivity can be attributed to the huge amount of time he devoted to teaching his son and to the numerous tours of Europe they undertook together in an attempt to promote Wolfgang's extraordinary talents. In short, Leopold sacrificed his own considerable career to further that of his son. No one was better qualified to recognize Wolfgang's gifts than his gifted father.

From all these sources and from his own teeming imagination, Mozart fashioned an individual style. By the time he was eight, Mozart had already had some music published. By 10, he was writing symphonies. At 14, he had produced his first full-length opera. By the time he was 17 years old, when he and his father returned home to Salzburg to try to find Wolfgang a job, he was a mature and fully formed creative artist.

Finding Mozart a job was not easy. The Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg was an autocratic ruler, and his patience had already been tried by the constant leaves of absence of his deputy music director (Mozart's father). The archbishop agreed to employ Mozart, but only in a junior position. Mozart wrote a fair amount of music in these years, but both he and his father felt that Salzburg was too stifling for him. After a few years, Mozart traveled again to try to find a position elsewhere. This time he traveled with his mother, because his father could not afford to leave his post for any more trips. He went to Munich, Mannheim (where Stamitz's great orchestra was centered), and Paris. But in none of these places was a job forthcoming. Most of Mozart's prospective employers thought he was too young and too talented ("overqualified" is the word we would use today) for a normal position. Indeed, any music director would have been threatened by this brash and brilliant youngster. In Paris he encountered not only disappointment but also tragedy: his mother died. He wrote to his father and sister:

I hope that you are prepared to hear with fortitude one of the saddest and most painful stories. . . . I can only judge from my own grief and sorrow what yours must be.

Although Mozart was given a promotion upon returning to Salzburg, he was still unsatisfied. In 1780 he accompanied the archbishop


on a visit to Vienna. Mozart was outraged when he was forced to eat in the servants' quarters and infuriated when the archbishop refused to let him go to the houses of other aristocrats who had invited him to perform for them. Mozart angrily demanded his release from the archbishop's employ and received it, as he wrote to his father, "with a kick on my ass from our worthy Prince-Archbishop."

Thus began the freelance career of one of the most brilliant musicians in history. At first, Mozart supported himself by giving piano lessons. He also wrote several sonatas for the piano and some piano concertos. Piano music was very popular in Vienna. Mozart had some success with a German comic opera he wrote in 1782 called *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (so called because the action takes place in a Turkish *seraglio*, or harem). Also in 1782 he married his landlady's daughter, a young soprano named Constanze Weber. His father, to whom he continued to write regularly, disapproved strongly of the marriage.


For the next few years, Mozart was highly successful. He undertook a set of string quartets that were designed to emulate those of Haydn, and he dedicated them in a warm and heartfelt style to the older master. We know that the two composers met a few times at string quartet parties. Haydn played the violin, Mozart the viola.

In these years, Mozart won great fame—and made quite a lot of money—through his piano concertos. Between 1784 and 1786, he composed 12 piano concertos. He appeared before the Viennese public as both composer and pianist, because he played the solo parts in the concertos himself. The concertos were very successful and brought Mozart to the height of his career.

Gradually, however, Mozart's popularity began to wane. The Viennese were always eager for some new sensation, and Mozart had been around for a while. In addition, the city

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"Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Turkish Finale"

 Watch the **Inside the Orchestra** video on **MySearchLab**

THE BOY GENIUS

The child Mozart caused such a sensation in London that he was examined and tested by a scientist. The scientist wrote a report attesting to Mozart's musical ability and age. The proof that he was indeed a boy and not a midget came at the end of a rigorous series of musical examinations.

While he was playing to me, a cat came in, upon which he immediately left his harpsichord, nor could we bring him back for a considerable time. He would also sometimes run about the room with a stick between his legs for a horse.

This boy will cause us all to be forgotten.

—composer Johann Adolf Hasse

COMPOSERS, PATRONS, AND AUDIENCES

Composers and Patrons in the Classic Era

Music patronage was at a turning point when Mozart went to Vienna in the last part of the eighteenth century. Many patrons of music continued to be wealthy aristocrats. Haydn's entire career was funded by a rich prince. Mozart's father and, for a time, Mozart himself were in the employ of another prince. But when Mozart went to Vienna in 1781, he contrived to make a living from a variety of sources. In addition to performances at aristocratic houses and commissions for particular works, Mozart gave piano and composition

lessons, put on operas, and gave many public concerts of his own music.

The eighteenth century saw a considerable rise in the number and availability of public concerts. Three types were common: charity concerts to raise money for local poorhouses and orphanages; subscription concerts, for which tickets were sold in advance; and benefit concerts, at which composers played for their own profit. Music was becoming more and more the province of the general public, and composers less and less the servants of the rich.



Portrait of the Mozart family from about 1780. Mozart plays a duet with his sister, while his father listens, and his mother is remembered in a painting behind them.

Painting, Baroque, 18th Century. Johann Nepomuk Della Croce, *The Mozart Family* (1780–1781). Oil on canvas. 140 × 186 cm. Mozart House, Salzburg, Austria. Erich Lessing, Art Resource.

very different from each other, but all three are richly orchestrated, enormously inventive, and full of subtle details that repay frequent rehearsals.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Mozart's last years is represented by his operas. Mozart had been interested in opera since his boyhood travels to Italy. He had already written several youthful pieces and, since coming to Vienna, he had written both an opera seria (serious Italian opera) and a singspiel (German comic opera). Now, in what would be the last five years of his life, he completed five great operas. The best known of these are *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *The Magic Flute* (completed in the year of his death, 1791). These operas are all very different, but in each of them Mozart displays his remarkable understanding of human nature in all its richness. In *Figaro*, he depicts with the finest subtlety the urgent adolescent sexuality of a servant boy and the deeply moving despair of a neglected wife. In *Don Giovanni*, Mozart explores the richly human experiences of determination, pride, grief, comedy, and seduction. In *The Magic Flute*, the themes are noble ambition, marital harmony, and pure love. In Mozart's hands, these ideals and emotions are transformed from the conventions of the opera stage into the deepest expression of human feelings.

In November of 1791, while he was working on a Requiem Mass (Mass for the Dead), Mozart became ill. And on December 5, at the age of 35, with half a lifetime of masterpieces still uncomposed, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died.

Find the **Quick Listen** on **MySearchLab**

"Mozart Symphony No. 39"

Find the **Quick Listen** on **MySearchLab**

Marriage of Figaro
"Dove Sono"

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"Mozart Requiem"

was undergoing a recession, and concert dates and composing contracts were hard to come by. Mozart's correspondence from the late 1780s is full of letters requesting loans from friends. Despite his dislike of authority, he made attempts to find a secure position at the Viennese court.

Mozart did not write many new symphonies during this period, but in the summer of 1788, in the space of about eight weeks, he wrote three symphonies in a row. These last three symphonies, nos. 39, 40, and 41, are the culmination of his work in the genre. They are



Mozart's father Leopold—violinist, composer, and Mozart's first teacher.

Mozart's Music

Mozart's music is a remarkable combination of the accessible and the profound. As Mozart wrote to his father, his music appeals to experts and amateurs alike. Another reason so many people are so attached to Mozart's music is its extraordinary breadth. There is an incredibly wide range in his more than 800 compositions, from the lightest little comic pieces to works that explore the great themes of human existence: life and death, love, tragedy, romance, despair, and hope.

Mozart wrote in all the main genres of Classic music: opera, symphony, string quartet, and sonata. He wrote solo concertos for a wide variety of instruments: violin, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and horn. But for his own instrument, the piano, he composed more than 20 concertos, which are among his greatest masterpieces.

Mozart wrote dozens of sonatas, both for solo piano and for combinations of instruments, including piano, strings, and winds. He also composed many great string quartets. In addition to these works, Mozart wrote several string quintets, in which an extra viola is added to the two violins, viola, and cello of the string quartet. This makes the music richer and the counterpoint fuller.

Mozart also greatly enriched the expressive power of opera. *The Magic Flute*, *Don Giovanni*, and *The Marriage of Figaro*

transcend convention by portraying people in all their psychological complexity.

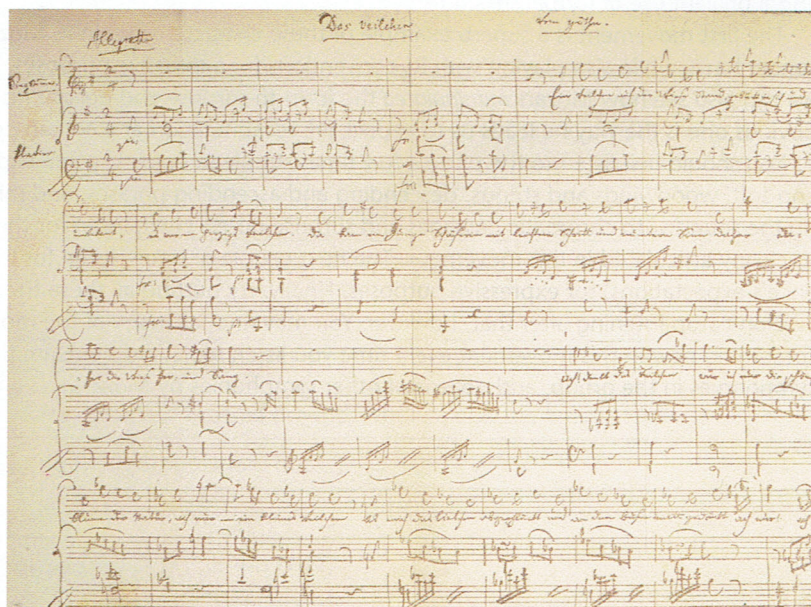
Even in his purely instrumental works, Mozart wrote music that flouted convention. He created works of great depth and seriousness for “background music” at garden parties. He wrote slow movements of heartbreaking simplicity for his piano concertos. Sometimes he used counterpoint to intensify his music in places where counterpoint was not usual. And his melodies often have passages that are chromatic (moving by half steps) at a time when most composers wrote melodies that are entirely diatonic (using only notes from the scale). Finally, Mozart's music sometimes passes briefly into the minor mode in the middle of major-mode passages, which creates added depth and emotional resonance. It is like the shadow of a small cloud passing over a sunny meadow.

Only a very small number of his works use a minor key as the tonic. Among these is the Symphony No. 40 in G minor, written in 1788. (See Listening Guide.)

Although Mozart's music is richer, more versatile, and more varied than most eighteenth-century music, it does use the same basic conventions as other music of the time. The instruments are the same, the forms are the same, and the primary genres that Mozart cultivated are the same. But Mozart's music speaks deeply to more people, covers a wider range of feeling, and resonates with more human significance than that of almost any other composer before or since. In that sense, Mozart's music is truly “classic.”

O Mozart, immortal
Mozart, how many,
how infinitely many
inspiring
suggestions of a
finer, better life have
you left in our souls!
—Franz Schubert

Mozart's own
manuscript of a song
for voice and piano.
Notice the speed
and clarity of his
handwriting.



MUSICAL FORGERIES

There is great excitement whenever a music manuscript purported to be by Haydn or Mozart turns up in an attic or an old desk drawer. Sometimes these documents are authentic. For example, in 2005 an authentic manuscript of an important work in Beethoven's handwriting was discovered in Philadelphia. It sold to a private collector for \$2 million. But often the manuscripts are forgeries, and some of them are good enough to fool even the experts (for a while). In 1994, some "newly discovered" Haydn piano sonatas, authenticated by a world-renowned Haydn scholar and due for performance at Harvard University's Music Department, were declared to be fakes.

The name of one of the great composers on the title page virtually guarantees a favorable reception for a work. For nearly a hundred years, a well-known symphony was thought to be by Mozart (his "37th Symphony"). It was hailed by critics as "typical of the master." But when the symphony turned out to be not by Mozart at all but by a less famous contemporary of his, critics immediately described it as "obviously not on a par with the work of the master." The work hadn't changed; it was the same music! Only people's preconceptions had changed.

LISTENING GUIDE

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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756–1791)

First Movement from Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550

Date of composition: 1788

Orchestration: flute, two oboes, two clarinets,
two bassoons, two horns, and strings

Tempo: *Allegro molto* ("Very fast")

Meter: $\frac{2}{2}$

Key: G minor

Duration: 8:18



CD II, 3

In the space of eight weeks during the summer of 1788, Mozart completed three large-scale symphonies. Perhaps he intended them to be published and performed together. Though there was no reason for him to have known this, they were to be his last.

The G-minor Symphony, the middle one of the three, is one of Mozart's best-known works and represents one of his greatest achievements in the symphonic realm. It is marked by perfect balance and control, a wealth of harmonic and instrumental color, and a brilliant use of formal structure.

The first movement is a superb example of these characteristics. In it, Mozart takes advantage of the dramatic possibilities of sonata form, while also playing with its conventions for expressive purposes. The basic structure of sonata form is easy to hear, but we can also see how Mozart *manipulated* the form to surprise and delight his listeners. There are many examples, but the most obvious one is the way he leads us to expect the recapitulation at a certain point, only to pull the rug out from under us.

You should first listen to the piece a few times simply to enjoy the fine expressive writing: the brilliant balance between loud and soft, woodwinds and strings, descending and ascending phrases, and minor and major keys. Notice, too, how Mozart spices up the sound with chromatic passages and surprise notes. Next, listen for the structure, the basic template of sonata form, which is so clearly articulated in this movement. The next couple of times, listen for how Mozart plays with this structure (and with his audience's expectations) for expressive purposes. Finally, try putting all these things together and listen for them all at once.

Don't stop listening after that, however. You may find, as many of the most experienced listeners do, that you will hear something new in this movement every time you listen to it. And there are three other movements in this symphony, three other symphonies in the group, and dozens of other symphonies by Mozart.