Wolfgang Mozart
Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.
Died December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550
Mozart entered this symphony in his catalog on July 25, 1788. The date of the first performance is not
known. At these concerts, Trevor Pinnock conducts Mozart’s revision of the score, adding a pair of
clarinets to the original version, which calls for one flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and
strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-six minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Mozart’s Fortieth
Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on November 18 and 19, 1892, with Theodore Thomas
conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on February
2, 4, and 5, 1995, with Zubin Mehta conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the
Ravinia Festival on July 8, 1938, with Artur Rodzinski conducting, and most recently on June 29, 2000,
with Pinchas Zukerman conducting.

Ironically, it is Mozart’s last three symphonies rather than the famous requiem that remain the mystery of
his final years. Almost as soon as Mozart died, romantic myth attached itself to the unfinished pages of
the requiem left scattered on his bed: a host of questions—who commissioned the work?; who finished
it?; was Mozart poisoned?—inspired painters, novelists, biographers, librettists, playwrights, and
screenwriters to heights of imaginative re-creation. We now know those answers: the requiem is
unfinished, but not unexplained.

The final symphonies, on the other hand—no. 39 in E-flat, the “great” G minor (no. 40), and the Jupiter
(no. 41)—continue to beg more questions than we can answer. Even what was once the most provocative
fact about these works—that Mozart never heard them—is now doubtful. We no longer believe that
Mozart wrote these three great symphonies for the drawer alone—that goes against all we know of his
working methods. But we don’t know what orchestra or occasion he had in mind. Apparently a series of
subscription concerts was planned for the summer of 1788, when Mozart entered the three symphonies in
his catalog, but there is no evidence that the performances took place. It is likely that the works were
conceived as a trilogy, with publication in mind (symphonies often were printed in groups of three), but
they weren’t published during Mozart’s lifetime.

Did Mozart ever hear them? Even if the projected subscription series of 1788 never took place, Mozart
did tour Germany the following year, conducting concerts for which we have only sketchy details. “A
Symphony,” for example, was advertised for the program at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on May 12. And
back home in Vienna, no less a musical big shot than Antonio Salieri conducted concerts on April 16 and
17, 1791, featuring a “grand symphony” by Mozart. The fact that the G minor symphony exists in two
versions—with and without clarinets—argues that Mozart revised the score for a specific performance.

No Mozart symphony—not even the brilliant Jupiter—has caused as much commotion over the years as
this one in G minor, sometimes known as the “great” to distinguish it from an earlier symphony in the
same key. It was one of a handful of Mozart’s works to capture the romantic imagination. Like the D minor
piano concerto, K. 466, it was played and admired even when Mozart’s reputation was at its lowest. It is
also one of the pieces that hints at the music Mozart might have written had he lived. It inspired later
composers, certainly—just listen to the minuet of Schubert’s Fifth Symphony. As with the greatest art,
Mozart's music means vastly different things to different people. Robert Schumann loved its Grecian lightness and grace; what carried it through the nineteenth century, however, was the force of its tragic power and its emotional complexity.

Like Beethoven's Fifth, Mozart's G minor symphony opens with material as famous as it is simple. In those few notes—some nervous pulsing from the violas and an unmelodious stammering from the violins—lies one of music's unforgettable gestures. Fifty years after Mozart's death, Franz Liszt produced piano arrangements of Beethoven's nine symphonies, claiming that, aside from sheer volume and variety of timbre, one could reproduce the essence of such music at the keyboard. Mendelssohn later commented: "Well, if he can play the beginning of Mozart's G minor symphony as it sounds in the band, I will believe him." A response from Liszt is not recorded, but it takes no more than a few seconds at the piano to prove Mendelssohn's point.

The movement progresses with such regularity, and at an urgent, no-nonsense clip (Mozart stepped up the tempo from his original allegro assai to molto allegro) that we are totally unprepared for the sudden harmonic jolts of the development section. Those few rocky pages, however, do warn us of the wrenching chromaticism in the Andante that follows, and of the eight unison bars in the finale that still sound completely haywire today. The Andante is so poignant and so touching that we may not even realize that it is in a major key. Although it follows all the rules, the powerful minuet suggests many things, but not social dancing. Despite its inherent turbulence, the persistence of G minor, and the eight measures at the start of the development that push us toward Schoenberg two hundred years before his time, the last movement, like a great opera finale, ultimately creates order.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

For the Record
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra has recorded Mozart's Fortieth Symphony three times, all for RCA: in 1930 with Frederick Stock conducting, in 1955 with Fritz Reiner conducting, and in 1981 with James Levine conducting.

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