Wolfgang Mozart – Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K. 543

Wolfgang Mozart

*Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.*

*Died December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.*

**Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K. 543**

Ironically, it’s 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’s no evidence that the performances took place. It’s 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.

The Symphony no. 39 in E-flat major is the least studied and performed of the three symphonies, and that in itself is something of a puzzle, for it is no less a masterwork. It doesn’t, however, have the tragic romanticism of the G minor symphony or the magnificent heroics that earned the C major its nickname, the *Jupiter*. In the nineteenth century, when
only the most dramatic of Mozart's works remained in the repertory, the E-flat symphony had no story to tell. Its hallmarks are purely musical—difficult to pinpoint or explain—and it's a work of considerable understatement.

There's nothing in the first movement that doesn't fit the textbook model of classical sonata form. Even the large slow introduction, which Mozart rarely uses in his symphonies, is a standard feature of Haydn's output at the same time. But listen to the way Mozart's introduction—exalted and grand, with stately dotted rhythms and rich chromaticism—sweeps almost imperceptibly into the lovely, singing main Allegro (Charles Rosen points out that the melody of the Allegro literally extends the unfinished cadence of the introduction). The effect is subtle and very modern—almost cinematic in the seamless merging from one scene to another—and the point was not lost on Beethoven, who spent much of his career perfecting the art of transition. Mozart's Allegro, beginning with a thread of sound and building to a point of high intensity, is made of strong and bold materials, unostentatiously used.

The Andante is a marvel of sustained eloquence, capped by moments of great power and passion that are all the more remarkable in music of such spare, chamber-music textures. The third movement is one of Mozart's most celebrated minuets, complete with a trio introduced by clarinets and based, for once, on a real rather than an imaginary ländler. The finale, in perpetual motion and colored by pervasive humor, is built entirely from one theme, and although Mozart pretends that his "second theme" is new, it is in fact merely a clever makeover of the first.

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