

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
 b. January 27, 1756; Salzburg
 d. December 5, 1791; Vienna

Overture to the opera “The Marriage of Figaro,” K. 492

Completed just in time for the opera’s first performance at the Vienna Burgtheater on May 1, 1786, this four-minute overture is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani and strings. Andreas Delfs led the most recent series performances of this work at concerts in April of 1999.

Shortly after a highly successful production of *The Seraglio*, Mozart began looking around for a new operatic subject that would enable him to gain another triumph in Vienna. His search led him through hundreds of manuscripts, including one rather ponderous plot in which a man in a goose costume played a key role in the action. As unlikely as it might seem, Mozart did actually compose eight numbers for the first act of this stillborn opera called *L’Oca del Cairo* (“The Goose of Cairo”). Mozart ultimately saw the futility of his project and left the work uncompleted.

About this same time, a rising young Italian poet, Lorenzo da Ponte, came to the composer’s attention. Da Ponte was originally a Venetian Jew, Emanuele Conegliano. Reared and educated by Bishop da Ponte of Ceneda, the young man adopted the Bishop’s name as his own. Although he had taken the minor holy orders, da Ponte became a worldly man, a sort of pale copy of Casanova. After he falling of favor with the royalty of Vienna, da Ponte wandered to the United States, where he died in 1838.

Soon after joining forces with da Ponte, Mozart embarked on an operatic setting of the second comedy from the trilogy, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, of the French author, Beaumarchais. As a play, this story had enjoyed a tremendous vogue in Paris; however, its revolutionary plot caused it to be banned in Vienna. By modern standards the play was not particularly revolutionary...it was the ease with which Figaro constantly outwitted his Count that was not at all humorous to royalty.

The complexities of the opera’s plot preclude a brief outline. It is enough to know that Mozart and da Ponte minimized its political nature and played up the sexual aspects, making the story a Freudian delight. Although the highly moral Beethoven was later to deplore Mozart’s involvement in such a racy escapade, the opera has hardly caused any noticeable strain on the world’s virtue.

A slyly fleeting Overture sets the carefree mood of the opera. Completed only a few days before the first performance on May 1, 1786, the overture ripples along through several themes and all too soon arrives at its final measure.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in B-flat major, K. 595, (No. 27)

Sketched possibly as early as 1788, this concerto was completed on January 5, 1791; Mozart was the soloist in this work’s first public performance on March 4, 1791, in Vienna. This 30-minute concerto uses an orchestra of flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns and strings. The last series presentation of this work featured Alicia deLarocha as the soloist with Zdenek Macal conducting at concerts of March 3, 4, 5, 1989.

The last of Mozart’s piano concertos, K. 595 is a work of exalted introspection. Dated January 5, 1791, the work was performed with Mozart as soloist on March 4, 1791, nine months and one day before the composer’s death. Although he wrote a number of other works in the remainder of that year--most notably *Die Zauberflote* and the *Requiem*-- this final piano concerto seems to provide the most personal glimpse of the inner Mozart during the final year of his life.

In his penetrating *Mozart and His Piano Concertos*, Cuthbert Girdlestone observes: “The resignation and nostalgia which infuse the works of these two years (1790-91) are present in all three movements, even in the 6/8 rondo. It spreads not only a veil of sadness over the whole

concerto; it also casts on it at times as it were an evening light, announcing the end of a life; the *largetto* in particular has the quality of a farewell. Needless to say, we do not look upon this as a forewarning of Mozart's own death; even if he had not been destined to pass away eleven months later, his mood at the close of 1790 would have inspired him with these strains; moreover, most of his works written after this concerto and therefore nearer his death have not this character; nothing, for instance, is further from it than the E-flat quintet. This resignation is not present all the time; now and again, his soul remembers its rebelliousness of former years and more passionate notes are sounded, but they do not last and weariness soon reigns supreme again, and is responsible for the noteworthy drops into the minor mode that occur in the allegro and rondo."

A recurrent theme in Mozart's life was his search for a permanent post. Many of his older colleagues enjoyed the economic security of such positions, yet Mozart, despite many tours and letters of inquiry, seemed only to reap applause and new commissions...even these were diminishing in his later years. To a certain extent, Mozart was the victim of his own genius. However, he also had the misfortune of living in a transitional period; a time when the old system of royal patronage was giving way to the rise of the free man. This period of history saw the beginning of the French Revolution and, in America, the signing of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Unaware of the political and social changes that were in motion, Mozart began to view his life as a chain of muted victories and crushing defeats.

From its first measures, Mozart's final piano concerto reveals a kinship with the G-minor *Symphony No. 40*; these are his only two works which begin with a simple one-measure preface before the statement of the first theme. Both works seem to be involved with elements of fate; the symphony rebels against it, while the concerto accepts it with resignation. The contents of this sonata-form first movement once caused the exiled Abbe Martinant de Preneuf to exclaim: "This music, so harmonious and so lofty in inspiration, so pure, both soft and sorrowful...made me forget as I listened to it my past woes and those that the future held perhaps in store for me...."

Following the twilight farewell of the *Largetto*, the final rondo uses as its recurring theme a folk song of unknown origin. A few days after completing this concerto Mozart used this theme again in a song which he entitled *Sehnsucht nach dem Frühlinge* ("Yearning for Spring"). Alfred Einstein said of this movement: "...the finale breathes a veiled joyfulness, as if blessed children were playing in Elysian fields, joyful, but without hate and without love."

Dmitri Shostakovich

b. September 25, 1906; St. Petersburg

d. August 9, 1975; Moscow

Symphony No. 11 in G minor, Opus 103 ("The Year 1905")

Written in 1957, this 55-minute work was given a dual first performance: On October 30, 1957, it was performed in Moscow by the Moscow State Symphony under Nathan Rakhlin and in Leningrad by that city's Philharmonic and Eugene Mravinsky. It is scored for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons, (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, 5 percussionists (bass drum, cymbals, suspended cymbal, snare drum, triangle, tam-tam, tubular bells, xylophone), two to four harps (!) and strings. This symphony most recent series performance took place in April of 2006, under guest conductor Gerard Schwarz.

Amid the vicissitudes of his life as a Soviet artist, Shostakovich maintained an integrity allowing him to express his innermost feelings while coping with the whims and demands of Party politics. Although his personal expressions emerged most naturally in his chamber music, Shostakovich's fifteen symphonies are layered with many potential levels of meaning. As a master of the abstract art of music, he could speak publicly of his works in general terms while maintaining silence about the more personal aspects. Although this complicates matters for those who now seek the

“meaning” of his music, it must be remembered that Shostakovich’s sometime conflicting statements were motivated by the very real dangers of his environment.

Soon after the success of his *Symphony No. 5* in late 1937, Shostakovich announced that he was working on a “Lenin” Symphony. Circumstances, including World War II, caused this particular “public” project to be tabled while he attended to other compositional efforts, including six more symphonies.

Well after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, Shostakovich accepted commissions for two “public symphonies”: No. 11, honoring the abortive revolution of 1905, and—soon thereafter— No. 12, a work “dedicated to the memory of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin” in commemoration of the successful Revolution in 1917. The Eleventh Symphony was first performed in both Moscow and Leningrad on October 30, 1957; in April of the following year it was awarded the Lenin Prize.

It has been suggested that Shostakovich, horrified by the brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, was drawing sympathetic parallels between the current revolution and the Czar’s suppression of the Russian people in 1905. (It’s also been argued that if the Czar reacted more humanely to the 1905 uprising, the 1917 revolution might never have taken place.) At another point, Shostakovich suggests that he was ruminating on events that took place just before his birth, comparing and contrasting them to Russian life a half-century later. The Eleventh Symphony is a vast tapestry of Russian folk song, revolutionary songs, political oppression and unquenchable human spirit all expressed through orchestral voices throughout its four continuous movements.

- I. “The Palace Square” (*Adagio*). Strings intone elements of a folk-like Shostakovich song entitled *Listen*, perhaps suggesting 1905’s starving hordes waiting for bread outside the Czar’s palace. Timpani and trumpet fanfares utilize the triplets from *Listen* and begin an obsession with three note groups that continue throughout the symphony. (Biographer Ian MacDonald comments “there are more triplets in the Eleventh Symphony than most composers write in their lifetimes.”)
- II. “The 9th of January” (*Allegro*). Unrest in the lower strings begins the second movement, an evocation of the day known to Russians as “Bloody Sunday.” In his book on Shostakovich’s symphonies, Roy Blokker explains: “On that day a large group of peasants and workers made a protest march carrying icons and singing religious songs to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. The tsar was not there; the marchers thought he was. Instead, they met a detachment of Cossack bodyguards who promptly opened fire on the protesters, perhaps mistaking their icons for weapons and their hymns for revolutionary songs. The Cossacks then rode down on the people, brandishing swords. A thousand unarmed men died in the snow.” The movement ends with a chillingly bleak epilogue.
- III. “In Memoriam” (*Adagio*). Cello and double bass pizzicato moves with grief-stricken tread toward the accompaniment of muted violas’ world-weary lament (“You Fell as Victims”). The movement builds grippingly through epic sorrow before subsiding toward acceptance.
- IV. “The Tocsin (Alarm Bell)” (*Allegro non troppo*). The warning motive sounds immediately in brass and woodwinds as Shostakovich launches this safely abstract, but obviously deeply felt warning to oppressive leaders. Having grown to a towering height, the music suddenly gives way to a ruminative English horn lament. When the faster tempo resumes, the bass clarinet voices an ominous recollection of the second movement’s opening theme. Its message delivered, the music drives relentlessly to the close.