

While Mozart's final days have been immortalized in fictionalized accounts like Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*, the facts alone tell a story that needs no added drama. Three years away from his legendary burial in a common grave, Mozart was in desperate financial straits. The family's extravagant tastes and the need to present a certain image to potential patrons had sunk them deep into debt as the wartime economy severely curtailed cultural activities, including the opportunity for commissions. *Don Giovanni* had just failed in Vienna, despite its warm reception in Prague, and Mozart seemed to be losing favor with the Viennese public. No longer able to afford city rent, Mozart was forced to find less expensive lodgings in the suburbs—and by June 1788, the composer was actually begging for money. In the midst of this personal chaos, Mozart produced some of his finest work. During the summer of 1788, in the breathtakingly short span of about six weeks, he composed his final three symphonies: No. 39, No. 40, and No. 41, the *Jupiter*.

Mozart's final symphonic trilogy raises two key questions. First, why did Mozart write these works? He may have intended to revive his subscription concerts, which began shortly after his arrival in Vienna in 1781 and ended in the spring of 1786. It is also possible, although highly unlikely, that he was simply inspired to create the symphonies. Second, did the works ever debut during Mozart's lifetime? There were several occasions at which one or more of the symphonies may have been performed. In 1790, Mozart went to Frankfurt to attend the festivities surrounding Austrian Emperor Leopold II's coronation as Holy Roman Emperor, and presented a concert that included an unnamed symphony. And in April 1791, a charity concert benefiting ailing and elderly Viennese musicians, their spouses and children featured "a large new symphony" by Mozart. What the final symphonies show without a doubt, however, is that Mozart had no idea they were to be his last. As Daniel Hertz writes, "By adding three grand symphonies to his portfolio in the summer of 1788, the composer was thinking ahead to future concert seasons, and not just those in Vienna."

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

Although the G Minor and C Major Symphonies are more frequently performed, Symphony No. 39 is no less deserving. Written in four movements, the work displays many of the attributes for which the others are well known. The symphony begins with a dramatic *Adagio* introduction, in which driving chords trade places with gently falling scales. The increasing tension gradually dissolves in the ensuing *Allegro*, which also contrasts vigorous string flourishes with moments of gentle lyricism. In the *Andante con moto*, a delicate melodic web is spun from the simple opening theme, while stormy interjections occasionally interrupt the texture. The rustic vigor of the *Menuetto: Allegro* evokes the *Ländler*, a lively folk dance popular in Austria that featured stomping, hopping, and even yodeling, while the *Finale (Allegro)* is sometimes said to recall the music of Haydn, with its pervasive use of a single theme. As the motive is varied and developed, the resulting witty optimism nearly eclipses the emotional intensity of the previous movements.

Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550

It is easy to hear the tragic circumstances of Mozart's final days echoing in the poignant motives of the Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, and this melancholy mood—combined with the lack of specific information about the circumstances of their composition—has contributed to the view that the symphonies are the final cathartic act of a tortured genius. Unlike the nineteenth century, however, when composers did write music for their own personal fulfillment, composers in the classical era were typically writing for a specific patron, and there are a few indications that the G Minor Symphony was actually performed. Moreover, Mozart later revised the work, adding clarinets and altering the oboe parts, which would more than likely have been done for a specific performance situation.

Despite the lack of evidence, it is tempting to imagine that the Symphony in G Minor is at heart an outpouring of Mozart's personal anguish. From the very beginning of the *Molto allegro*, the mysterious-sounding theme establishes the melancholy, restless mood that permeates the symphony, and the dramatic development of the motive further heightens the tension. Although the gentle second theme initially serves as a welcome contrast, its reiteration in the minor mode at the end of the movement alters its first impression considerably. The lyrical beauty of the *Andante* is shot through with subtly pulsing undercurrents that frequently culminate in heartrending climaxes. In the third movement, brooding, sinister music replaces the traditional charm of the courtly minuet, while the overtly major mode and bucolic charm of the trio sound almost disingenuous in contrast with the outer minuet sections. The concluding *Allegro assai* reinforces the tragic mood, its occasional moments of lighthearted humor and optimism ultimately subsumed within the forceful reiterations of the minor key that conclude the work.

Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K. 551 (*Jupiter*)

While the *Jupiter* wasn't a conscious summation of Mozart's symphonic oeuvre, its complexity and creativity have led many to view it in this light. And although the origin of its majestic sobriquet is unknown (it may have been bestowed by an eager publisher), the monumental quality of the *Jupiter* Symphony makes its name more than marketing hyperbole.

The *Jupiter* makes an unforgettable statement from the very start. The opening motive of the *Allegro vivace* is at once boldly extroverted and quietly pensive, encapsulating the main contrasting moods of the work in a single melody. The jaunty second theme is taken from a comic aria Mozart had written for another composer's *opera buffa*, and originally accompanied the words, "You've but sluggish wit, dear Signor Pompeo! Go and learn a bit of the ways of the world." Muted strings help to create the warmth and intimacy of the *Andante cantabile*, in which seeming contentment gradually gives way

to restless passion. Following the jocular *Menuetto*, the contrapuntal opening of the monumental *Molto allegro* was so surprising that it led to the designation of the work as the “Symphony with the Fugue Finale.” Although the movement’s counterpoint is striking, it is far from an academic exercise. Mozart uses his remarkable prowess with the technique to explore the dictates of classical form, jubilantly taking the *Jupiter* Symphony to dizzying new heights of creativity.