

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

# Mozart's Symphony No. 40

Nov 14 &amp; 15, 2020

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)****CONCERTO FOR FLUTE AND HARP, K. 299****Duration: ca. 30 minutes**

What can be said of Mozart that hasn't been said a thousand times over? So much has been written about this precocious wunderkind, the effortless style of many of his 626 published compositions, the perfection of his operas, late symphonies and piano concertos, and his tragic death at age 35, that anything more seems redundant.

We can all agree, however, that Mozart was an innate musician who absorbed, analyzed and created art with uncanny ease and profound humanity. His vulnerability also reminds us that he was not a musical god, but a mortal.

In contrast to the symphony on tonight's program, which shows the composer in an exalted mode, the *Concerto for Flute and Harp* is a youthful and charming work, easy on the ears and sprinkled with delicate ornament. Mozart composed it for two amateur musicians, in the "easy" key of C major, and while he wrote improvisational cadenzas for each instrument, the originals were lost long ago.

But what looks easy in a piece by Mozart can be deceiving, says Clay Ellerbroek, TFO's principal flute and featured soloist this weekend with colleague Anna Kate Mackle, the orchestra's principal harp. The two last appeared on stage together as soloists in 2014 in *Toward the Sea II* by Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu. "The complexity lies in its simplicity," Ellerbroek said of the concerto. "Sometimes, the easiest things to do can be the most difficult."

For Mackle, the challenge isn't just hitting the right notes and finding an artistic point of view, it's just being heard.

"Even though it's in the key of C, with no accidentals, it doesn't make the piece any less difficult for the harp," she said. "It's a half an hour of playing scales and arpeggios as loud as you can. Because when you play the harp you're trying to project a bit more so you're heard equally with the other soloist."

Oddly, Mozart wasn't fond of either the flute or the harp, although you would never know by listening to this music. It begins with a playful allegro in which both soloists introduce and develop their assigned tunes, and ends with another allegro that sums up their musical discussion. But in between these two movements is the secret sauce - an andantino that simmers with Mozartean magic.

"I think it's one of the most elegant, graceful and beautiful melodies out there," added Mackle, and Ellerbroek agreed.

"When the flute and harp are playing this melody together, I think of it as Mozart's idea of heaven," he said of the middle movement. "He wrote tons of beautiful stuff for the flute, but this is at the top."

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)****SYMPHONY NO. 40 in G MINOR****Duration: ca. 35 minutes**

Most of us expect to be paid for our labor, whether we're a carpenter or a doctor. The same goes with composers, who, like everyone else, have to put food on the table. Why then, in a six-week period in 1788, did Mozart create three of the most magnificent works of the era without asking for so much as a penny, or even a performance?

Such is the case of the *Symphonies 39, 40 and 41*, which together form the crowning achievement of symphonic art of the time and rank with the most influential works of any period. What continues to amaze the listener about this music is how Mozart sketched, orchestrated and polished all three in such a short time, without the pressure of deadline, as he never planned their premieres. They served no formal occasion and produced no income. Rather, they symbolize an approaching romantic spirit driven by art for art's sake. George Bernard Shaw may have summed it up best by calling this triptych "the last word of the 18th century."

Of the three, *Symphony No. 40* is the most popular, and puts Mozart's expressive and technical powers in full display. This isn't a work meant to entertain, but to envelop listeners in a struggle. It's one of only two symphonies Mozart wrote in a minor key - along with the *Symphony No. 25 in G Minor* - and contains no cheerful passages so common in Mozart. The symphony is serious throughout and unrelenting in its mood.

If this symphony sounds tame by today's standard, it wasn't to those who first heard it, notes Alfred Einstein in *Mozart: His Character, His Work*. It plunges us "into the abyss of the soul, symbolized in modulations so bold that to Mozart's contemporaries they must have seemed to lose their way entirely, and so distant that only Mozart himself could find the path back from them into the light of day."

This tragic-sounding, highly personal music opens with an aching theme in G minor that transforms itself throughout the work. While emotionally charged, the first movement is a model of clarity, every instrument heard as part of the collective voice. In a masterstroke, Mozart removed the celebratory ranks of drums and trumpets, enhancing the music's intimacy.

The arresting theme of the first movement gives way to the balm of a sublime slow section in E flat major, followed by a terse, syncopated minuet that most certainly influenced both Schubert and Mahler. The finale is like nothing Mozart had ever written, a propulsive, almost demonic movement that contains passages bordering on the atonal. The symphony ends not with the traditional flip into a major key, but stays defiantly in G minor.

*Program notes by Kurt Loft, former music critic for The Tampa Tribune who has been writing about the area's arts for more than 40 years.*