

Wolfgang amadeus mozart, symphony no. 40 in g minor, k. 550 essay sample

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I. Work Analysis

Being an admirer of the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, I chose to analyze Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G Minor. An early analyst and critic of Mozart's music, Otto Jahn called the Symphony No. 40 " a symphony of pain and lamentation." Another critic said it was " nothing but joy and animation" (Kramer 480). While these two remarks may be used as extreme ways to interpret the symphony, its character and mood are captivating and touching.

The standard instrumentation for this piece includes woodwinds (flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons), strings (violins, violas, cellos, and basses), and brass (horns). The instrumentation does not include any percussion or heavy brass. The horns are used sparingly, only to add density to the tone or emphasize the crescendos and sforzandos.

The symphony itself is comprised of four movements:

Movement One – Molto allegro

Movement Two – Andante

Movement Three – Allegretto

Movement Four – Allegro assai

The first movement of the symphony opens in a minor key with a piano but agitated principal theme that repeats itself throughout the movement. Such an opening is not a usual one; a listener may have expected some sort of an

introduction to precede such a theme, but Mozart decides to omit any prelude, thereby establishing a certain feeling of restlessness or anxiety. The first movement exhibits frequent interchanges between piano and forte. Of all the sections of the first movement, only the development is played in a major key with disjunct motion. This, combined with other expressive elements, further contributes to the movement's general uneasy mood. The meter here is duple simple, and it remains constant throughout the movement. The first movement is presented in the Sonata-allegro form, with a motivic structure quality in the principal theme, and a homophonic texture.

Obediently following the sonata plan, Mozart slows down his second movement to andante. Violas play the principal theme and are later joined by the first and second violins, imitating one another. The dominating strings maintain dynamics within range of piano, but sforzandos are contributed by the basses. The meter in this movement is duple compound, and like in the first movement, this one is composed in sonata-allegro form. Homophonic accompaniment in an E-flat tonality supports a wide-range, but conjunct-motion melody that is characterized by regular periodic structures.

The third movement is in triple simple meter with the orchestra once again dominated by the strings. The minuet and trio form naturally divides the movement into three sections with different keys, dynamics, and a da capo. The minuet section and its a da capo are played forte and in a minor key, while the trio is piano and in a major key. The tempo remains allegretto throughout the entire movement. Unlike the second movement, the motion of the melody is disjunct and wide-range, structured in regular periods. The

movement begins in a G minor tonality and then changes to G major. The texture remains homophonic throughout the entire movement.

The final movement of the symphony is again dominated by the strings. The tempo of this movement is *allegro assai*, which combined with disjunct melodic motion in the portions played *forte*, maintains the stressful, nervous mood of the symphony. These sections are interchanged by ones played *piano* and *adagio*, with a narrow melodic range and conjunct motion. This movement is composed in sonata-allegro form with a duple simple meter. The motion is mostly conjunct, except for sections played *presto*, where the motion is disjunct and the range is wide. The tonality of this movement is G minor, and the texture is homophonic.

II. Composer background.

At the time of this symphony's composition, in the first half of 1788 when Mozart's creative powers were at their peak, his everyday life suddenly began to deteriorate. Although he had recently been appointed a composer to the Court of Emperor Joseph II, the salary was meager and the duties were light. Two or three years previously Mozart's concert schedule was busy and an abundance of students provided him with an adequate income. He had triumphed in Prague with *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1786 and *Don Giovanni* in 1787. Now his fortunes went into a slump. When *Don Giovanni* was performed for the first time in Vienna, on the 7th of May, 1788, it aroused mixed reactions. Although it was given fifteen times that year, it does not seem to have been regarded as a success in Vienna. In the spring of 1788

Mozart could not obtain enough subscribers to a set of three string quintets, and the projected publication was postponed and then abandoned. In June Mozart planned a series of public concerts, but these apparently did not occur. After 1788, Mozart would never again perform a public concert in Vienna, and his desperate financial situation made him write letters to relatives and friends, asking for money (Broder vii).

Nevertheless, Mozart continued to compose with his characteristic and inspiration. The failures of his performances and the consequent financial hardships took a heavy toll on Mozart's already fragile health. The lack of commission or public recognition, however, did not stop Mozart from writing. Mozart composed his last three symphonies (Nos. 39, 40, and 41) in only two months, without commission or payment. Furthermore, at least two of these symphonies were never performed during his lifetime. As to why they were not performed, some people believe that Mozart had such an intense inner need to express himself that he could not wait for a patron from whom to charge commission. Perhaps these were the circumstances that inspired such a feeling of insecurity, anxiety, and urgency in Symphony No. 40. The composer needed success, recognition, and simply money.

IV. Personal Reaction.

On a personal level, I was also inspired with the same unexplained feeling of urgency and anxiety while listening to this symphony. The first movement creates this mood with its very first motive. However, it seemed hard for me to follow through the entire piece without having lost some of this

impression to the more subdued second and third movements. Perhaps Mozart's emotions at the time were too complex for me to understand at this point; after all, these two movements were not composed just to fill the void between the first and the last movements. But maybe Mozart knew that the listeners would be exhausted if the same mood prevailed throughout the entire symphony.

Either way, my personal preference remains with the more sonically and emotionally powerful productions of such composers such as Chaikovsky, Prokofiev, Grieg, and Wagner who managed to deliver similarly strong emotions through shorter, more concise pieces of music. For example, Chaikovsky's famous ballet *The Nutcracker* is comprised of several short suites, each one with its own feeling, mood, and character. The entire work feels like a wonderful theme park, rather than a long, consuming labyrinth that comes to mind with Mozart's *Symphony No. 40*. Edward Grieg in his *In der Halle des Bergkönigs* and Richard Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries* fascinate and inspire me to a much greater extent, despite their much smaller duration. Of course, it should not be forgotten that the pieces I listed are all operas and ballets and have very little to do with the symphony in general, but they are still the music I prefer thanks to their equally high power and better understandability.

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