

PROGRAM NOTES

It is not easy to convey an adequate conception of the enthusiasm of the Bohemians for Mozart's music. The pieces which were admired least of all in other countries were regarded by those people as things divine; and, more wonderful still, the great beauties which other nations discovered in the music of that rare genius only after many, many performances, were perfectly appreciated by the Bohemians on the very first evening.

—Lorenzo Da Ponte

Meine Prager verstehen mich (My Praguers understand me)

—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

In Mozart's last years, the citizens of Prague discovered his music and lavished on him the level of admiration, adulation, and box office success he had long felt should rightly have been his. Somehow, back home in Vienna that level of support had eluded him. He had made a successful career there, and had appreciative supporters, but when *La Nozze di Figaro* reached Prague, there seemed to be an immediate and clear understanding, at the popular level, that he stood head and shoulders above all his contemporaries. This has been the unwavering judgement of history ever since, so perhaps Mozart's Praguers really were the first to truly understand him.

The cultural connections between Vienna and Prague had a long history rooted in their political relationship. Bohemia had been a constituent kingdom of the Habsburg Empire since 1526, yet enjoyed relative independence and a certain special prominence. In 1609, Rudolf II made Prague, rather than Vienna, the capital of the Empire, as it had been centuries earlier. By the late 18th century, however, decades of attempts by Vienna to impose its culture and language on Bohemia had produced mixed results. German effectively became the second official language and was widely spoken, but an incipient Czech nationalist movement had risen to resist the assimilation of local traditions.

Music, fortunately, transcended these frictions (although one has to wonder whether works like *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* or *Die Zauberflöte* could ever have gotten the enthusiastic reception given to his Italian operas). *Figaro*, unbelievably, received a lukewarm response in Vienna, so when the Estates Theater in Prague decided to stage it, the disappointed composer stayed home. Soon, word reached Vienna that the Prague *Figaro* was a hit, its unforgettable tunes now heard all over in the city streets. Mozart then decided he would go himself to Prague to both compose and produce his next opera, *Don Giovanni*. While there in 1787, he basked in the glow of his celebrity, produced another immortal masterpiece, and by some accounts, even fell in love with the wife of his host.

This musical connection between Vienna and Bohemia was by no means anomalous. Many Bohemian musicians worked in Vienna during Mozart's years there (the reverse was also true), as did the other two composers on this program. Václav Pichl studied music and theology in Prague before being appointed as violinist in a private orchestra by Mozart's friend, the composer Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf. In 1770 Dittersdorf became first violinist of the Vienna court theater, so it is most likely that he and Mozart were at least casual acquaintances.

František Krommer was a prolific Bohemian composer who wrote over three hundred compositions. He worked in Vienna on many occasions beginning in 1783, and by 1798, was Maestro di Cappella for Duke Ignaz Fuchs. In 1814 he became Kapellmeister for the Imperial Court of Austria, a position he held until his death in 1831. His sunny *Oboe Quartet in C Major* has long been a part of oboists' repertoire, and a favorite companion to Mozart's *Quartet K. 370*.

The *Adagio and Fugue in D Minor, K. 404a* was written shortly before Mozart's travels to Prague. It shows the relative seriousness that had partly replaced the vaunted frivolity found in much of his music. After being introduced to the music of Bach by his patron Baron Von Swieten, Mozart began writing contrapuntal music that

shows his newfound appreciation for *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. He even claimed in a letter that his wife Constanze would now only ask for fugues, and that was all he played at home.

Mozart composed the simple and evocative *Adagio for English Horn and Strings in C Major, K. 580a* in Vienna in between the five trips he made to Prague, and it provides a stark contrast to his string trio. It remains a rarity in performance and on recordings, yet it sounds familiar to many listeners because its opening is identical to Mozart's much more famous choral work *Ave Verum Corpus*. Eschewing counterpoint, the composer casts this work as a song for the tenor oboe, or english horn, one of the most unusual and haunting voices in his instrumentarium.

The *Oboe Quartet K. 370* is one of the gems of the oboe repertoire that Mozart wrote for his friend, the oboist Friedrich Ramm, who had evidently found a way to play some high notes on the instrument that would not become normal technique for another generation. The brilliance of the outer movements and the deep pathos of the adagio make it the quintessential oboe work of the late 18th century.

—Gonzalo X. Ruiz