

Symphony No. 39 in E^b, K. 543—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

While Mozart had enjoyed some degree of success with his operas during the recent years, he was again in deep financial trouble during 1788. His income from time to time was evidently encouraging, but he was notorious for his over-spending. So, there are extant some heart-rending letters to his friends, literally begging for money. It is in this context that he moved his family from the inner city of Vienna out to the suburbs for the summer. There he had at his disposal a quite large apartment adjacent to an attractive garden. In this pleasant atmosphere, in less than two months, working at what must have been a feverish pace, Mozart wrote three of his most important works: his last three symphonies—the E^b, the G minor, and the “Jupiter.” We don’t know his motivation for turning out these masterpieces in so short a time, although there is some evidence that he was preparing for performances called “Concerts in the Casino”—a rather modern sounding affair! In any case, they are a significant part of his musical legacy.

The E^b symphony was finished first, on June 26. It consists, as one would expect, of four movements, in the conventional arrangement. But, in an unusual move, he chose to eliminate the oboes from this symphony. Accordingly, the clarinets, which were slow to gain acceptance into the orchestra, take on a rôle of greater prominence in this work. The first movement opens with an impressive, slow introduction, stately, virile, and a perfect prologue to an evidently substantial work. It seems clear that Mozart’s time composing operas surfaces in a tense sense of drama in this dark introduction, with some rather startling dissonances. The ensuing *allegro* seems to just grow out of the slow introduction, and we’re into the movement proper almost before we know it. While it teems with motives and melodic elements so characteristic of the composer, they don’t strike one as easily memorable as do many of the tunes from the last two symphonies so familiar to all. Rather, they appear to be essential building blocks of a movement of great architectonic integrity—an entity in which the strength and attractiveness of the whole subsumes the parts. You can, however, spot the second theme, for it features the clarinets—Mozart wrote so wonderfully for that instrument.

The second movement begins gently, in an almost pastoral vein, featuring the strings. The contrasting section brings the woodwinds to the fore, again, often featuring the clarinets’ dulcet sound. As this movement unfolds, Mozart explores some rather distant, imaginative key areas, the sound of which go far to enhance the overall interest. The third movement, which as most might remember, almost always is the requisite minute. But this one just doesn’t mark time until the real action of a vigorous finale—it really stands out. The outer sections are a bit rough and bucolic in an unmistakably Austrian way. But, the real allure is in the middle part, where the two clarinets—who else?—give a charming imitation of a street barrel organ, grinding away on a popular tune. Notice especially the low, flowing accompaniment figure in the second clarinet—not yet the cliché that it later became. The last movement takes off energetically with what is obviously the main theme—it’s the only theme! For this sparkling finale Mozart eschews his usual contrasting, lyric idea, and employs a common technique of his older friend and colleague, Joseph Haydn: one idea alone, put through an apparently inexhaustible cascade of imaginative guises. Think of Beethoven, here, as well. True genius takes over; one simple little idea is all that the mature Mozart needs to create a work that is nothing less than amazing. It’s pellucidly clear that the E^b symphony stands as equal to its somewhat better known cohorts in the remarkable summertime trilogy.

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