



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 4 – Capricious Classics

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Starburst—Jessie Montgomery

Montgomery is a native New Yorker, a graduate of the Juilliard School in violin performance, and holds a master's degree from New York University in music composition. Her publications focus on various combinations of strings, and enjoy wide performance popularity with noted ensembles throughout the country. She is a devoted supporter of educational activities, and youth musical ensembles. Her musical style is, if anything eclectic, and is obviously a reflection of the enormous variety of musical art in her native New York City. Mahler once somewhat fatuously remarked something to the effect that a symphony should contain "everything." Well, Montgomery dips into a remarkable universe of musical traditions, and reinterprets them in her own voice—just not all in one piece, of course.

Starburst was written in 2012 for the "Sphinx Virtuosi," the professional touring ensemble of the Sphinx Organization. The latter supports young African-American string players in the Detroit area; Montgomery is composer-in-residence for the organization. *Starburst* takes its title from the composer's feeling that the young members of the "Sphinx Virtuosi" are rather like "new stars in a galaxy."

A brief, but scintillating, affair, *Starburst* is a winsome example of much of new music of the twenty-first century. Montgomery is typical of young contemporary composers unhindered by the siren calls that dominated "academic" music of the second half of the twentieth century: complexity, dissonance, adherence to "systems," and a general tendency to value art that is esoteric and recondite. Rather, the cheerful staccato perpetual motion and constant interplay of a seemingly endless variety of ideas and motives creates a vivacious sparkle that perfectly encapsulates the title of the work. While not exactly clearly establishing a "key" for the audience, *Starburst* is a pleasant exploration of familiar scales, chords, arpeggios, and melodic ideas that anyone can enjoy and recognize. But, of course, adroitly woven together into quite a new composition. Who should know better than the composer herself how to describe it?

This brief one-movement work for string orchestra is a play on imagery of rapidly changing musical colors. Exploding gestures are juxtaposed with gentle fleeting melodies in an attempt to create a multidimensional soundscape. A common definition of a starburst, "the rapid formation of large numbers of new stars in a galaxy at a rate high enough to alter the structure of the galaxy significantly," lends itself almost literally to the nature of the performing ensemble that premiered the work, the Sphinx Virtuosi, and I wrote the piece with their dynamic in mind.

Concerto for Two Clarinets in E^b, op. 35 (P III:3)—Franz Krommer

Krommer was born in Moravia, but like so many artists from that time and place, he spent his career moving easily throughout the vast, multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. That's why his name, like that of everyone from Liszt to Stamitz was traditionally given in the German form. His real name was František Vincenc Kramář. Serving at times in Hungary and Austria, he ended his distinguished career in Vienna, where he was composer for the Imperial Court. Today, it is not generally appreciated in this country the degree to which Czech composers and performers were an integral part of the music scene in Vienna in centuries past. Krommer is a typical example of their importance, and while certainly not a household word today, at the time he was well known and respected—even seen as one of Beethoven's rivals. Living during the lives of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, his musical style reflects the span of them all, as he evolved from a “pre-classic” composer to a romantic one. A prolific composer—more than three hundred published works—he composed over seventy string quartets and nine symphonies. He is especially known today for his contributions to wind literature, including wind ensembles and wind concertos. The latter are for a variety of solo instruments, including “triple” concertos for flute, oboe, and violin; solo concertos for clarinet, flute, and oboe; and the two double concertos for clarinets. While composers during the nineteenth century wrote relatively fewer concertos for clarinet, by the early 1770s it seemed as if everyone and his brother was composing them. So, we have examples from masters like Mozart, von Weber, and Spohr, as well.

Krommer's first double clarinet concerto, composed around 1802, is in the usual three movements, and takes full advantage of the resources of the instrument. A facile technique, warm low notes, and great dynamic flexibility are innate to the instrument, and all are on display in this charming and entertaining work. It's both a reflection of the resources of the early nineteenth-century instrument, and testament to why it was one of Mozart's favorite instruments. Inevitably, a common reaction to first hearing Krommer's work is that “It sounds like Mozart!” And so it does, along with everyone else at the time, for it's composed in the mature classic style, and it is done well, at that.

The first movement is in a typical classical concerto first movement form. After a long, bustling orchestra exposition, in which the two solo clarinets cheerfully participate as part of the wind section, they finally softly enter with the main theme together in harmony. Since there are two of the same instrument there's no opportunity for the contrasts of color and register that two different instruments might provide in long solo sections, Krommer largely keeps the two clarinets joined in harness. So the two engage in gay repartee, as in a friendly conversation between close friends. They answer back and forth, occasionally joining together in harmony, or perhaps with one singing in sustained tones high up, and the other busily engaged in what one wag called “oily German band” arpeggios in the low register. Tunes seem to just “fall out of his sleeve,” and Krommer provides a parade of cheerful ones as the exposition zips ahead. At the usual movement to the dominant at the advent of the second thematic area, Krommer creatively plays around with both the major and the minor mode. The development explores the usual contrasts in key, including

some extended forays into the minor. The imaginative parade of ideas seems to never stop, until the easily recognizable return of the recapitulation.

The slow movement is a noble and dramatic one in C minor that exploits the clarinet's expressive side. Krommer deftly moves through some interesting other minor keys—with brief turns to the major. Throughout one hears an expressive use of the chromatic lines that are redolent of many of Mozart's *serioso* moments.

The last movement is, as one might expect, a rondo. So, the main section, which returns after contrasting sections, is a happy little dance in 6/8 time—not too fast. Soon, the first contrasting section appears, which is a study in the clarinet's effortless facility. Arpeggios and soaring scales careen with abandon. After an abbreviated reprise of the main rondo theme, the second contrasting section takes us to a doleful C minor. Then, just an allusion to the main theme leads right into another virtuosic new section. This time, the second clarinet gives quite a display of fluid motion in the very bottom of the instrument's tessitura—something the clarinet does exceedingly well. And so it goes. Finally, the dash to the end brings the familiar arpeggios and scales, this time featuring cascading chromatic scales in thirds that bring a really delightful piece to conclusion.

Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven were not the only game in town in those days.

Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

While Mozart had enjoyed some degree of success with his operas during the years leading up to 1788, by then he was again in deep financial trouble. 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 that 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.

While the “Jupiter” symphony is universally hailed as a masterpiece in contrapuntal wizardry, and the E^b symphony is not as often performed as the other two, the G minor symphony is quintessential popular Mozart. Perhaps with the exception of the opening of the *Requiem Mass*, no other opening bars of his works is so well known, and just shouts “Mozart!”

Mozart wrote some of his most heartfelt and serious music in G minor and so it is here. He much earlier had composed the *Sturm und Drang* “little” G minor symphony, and these two in G minor are the only symphonies in a minor key out of the forty-one that he composed. The later G minor symphony exists in two versions, with and without clarinets in the wind section. The version with clarinets is probably the second version, and most likely made for a specific performance, based upon the local orchestra—the composer being a pragmatist.

Tonight, one will hear the version without clarinets. Also missing from the orchestra in this work are the usual trumpets and timpani. Which I think adds to the overall dark atmosphere.

The brooding, almost ominous, first movement begins with just a bit of a murmur in the lower strings before the famous main theme comes in. It's for strings only, but listen for the delightful addition of the sustained woodwinds upon the theme's repeat—a masterful touch. A bustling transition leads to the happy, lyrical second theme in the usual relative major—B^b. Brief allusions to the first theme still appear, though, and we're soon to a dynamic exploration of it in the development. Mozart's absolute mastery of drama—evidenced in his incomparable operas—is on full display here in the variety of, not only harmonic areas, but in contrasts of dynamics, rhythm, and pacing. The recap comes soon—it's a remarkable concise movement, without the “fat” by which a lesser composer would have been tempted.

The following *andante* in E^b major takes us away from the turmoil and crepuscular atmosphere of the first movement. The first theme begins smoothly stepwise, followed by an expressive droop over a throbbing bass. The second theme features a birdlike “chirping” rhythm—easy to spot and becomes a signal motive in the movement. A third theme closes out the beginning. Development of these ideas begins with an intensification of the pounding bass, and the main ideas are, again, clear, as Mozart works with them. In his maturity Mozart gained a mastery of orchestra color, even with the somewhat limited resources of the classical orchestra. That skill comes to the fore in this section in the imaginative contrasts of color and mass.

The third movement was conventionally a minuet in those times, but this one is only an “honorary” minuet. I can't imagine it being danced to, but of course it provides the traditional contrast in tempo and rhythm that every symphony needs at this point. Its salient characteristic—other than being in a dark minor mode—is the hemiola rhythm. Hemiola is just a nice Greek word for factoring the six beats in two bars as 2+2+2 rather than the usual 3+3. That rhythmic fillip adds a distinct flavor to the rather sinister affair, especially as the platform for the essential gritty dissonance here. The usual middle section features a turn to the pleasant parallel G major key—its only incidence in the symphony. Here, the woodwinds assume prominence, aided by the pair of horns. A repeat of the beginning rounds it off in conventional manner.

The energetic finale begins with a standard cliché of the times, a “Mannheim rocket”—a rapid ascending arpeggio covering more than an octave. The second theme, in the usual relative B^b major, and in the best Mozartian style, is somewhat more lyrical. The strings take the first turn at it, and then it's heard prominently in the solo clarinet. The relentless tempo drives right into the development, where the opening figure is driven all over the harmonic map, accompanied by impressive contrapuntal figuration. The recap blazes to a dramatic ending, no less evocative and darkly emphatic than any tragic opera. The great analyst Donald Tovy was spot on when he that wrote that the musical language and spirit of this work was right out of Mozart's immortal *opere buffe*.

--Wm. E. Runyan
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