NORTHWEST
Sinfonietta
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Jupiter in the Age of Enlightenment

November 8, 2002 - Town Hall Seattle
November 9, 2002 - Rialto Theater Tacoma
November 10, 2002 - Washington Center for Performing Arts Olympia

Gluck: from Orpheus
Kraus: Sinfonia Buffa
Mozart: Symphony No. 41 "Jupiter"

Program Notes by Ron Drummond

To the Romantics, Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) was one of the greatest composers of the Classical Era if not of all time, worthy of keeping company with Mozart and Beethoven. If he is far less well known today, Gluck is still revered by scholars and music lovers alike for his crucial formative influence on the classical style in general and on the reformation of opera in particular.

By the 1750s, opera had grown staid in its conventions. As a genre, it was two-headed, with opera seria ("serious") and opera buffa ("comic") kept emphatically separate. Yet within each type, the component parts were so rigid in form, and the libretti were so lacking in structural cohesion, that the arias and overtures from one opera could be swapped with those of another with little deleterious effect, and often were. It was quite common for even the most talented composers to borrow extensively from their own past works (Handel did it), and for directors to slap together pastiches that were often more popular than genuinely new works.

Gluck's contribution began with the freshness of his approach, which was due in part to the fact that he was almost wholly self-taught. (A lingering awkwardness in his handling of harmony and counterpoint would mar even his greatest works, though who's to say that that was not the price he had to pay for his originality?) The son and grandson of forest managers in Bohemia, Gluck ran away to Prague at 13 so he could pursue his love of music, and indeed it was by his musical wits that he managed to survive. Later, in Italy, he composed the first of dozens of operas molded on the old forms, exemplified in the libretti of Pietro Metastasio. But even as Gluck mastered traditional opera, there was a dramatic directness and expressive simplicity to his music that astonished audiences; Metastasio himself described Gluck's setting of his Semiramide as "insupportably barbaric music."

Having travelled widely and staged his operas with great success throughout Europe, Gluck finally settled in Vienna in 1752, where he married into a wealthy, well-connected family and quickly established himself at the forefront of the imperial capital's musical life. Already, Gluck's innovations had served to knit the elements of opera into a more coherent whole. He was among the first to tie the overture into the opening scenes, and had increased the musical interest of the recitatives by linking them expressively and musically with the arias they introduced.

But Gluck's most important reforms came relatively late in his career, often in conjunction with a new librettist, Raniero Calzabigi, with whom Gluck wrote his most enduring works, including Orfeo ed Euridice. Gluck rejected virtuoso display for its own sake, insisting that arias should always move the action forward. With Calzabigi providing a dramatic unity that Metastasio had never achieved, Gluck sought always to shape the music to the evolving moods and changing situations of the story, and to do so with "simplicity, naturalness, and truth," which could well serve as both Gluck's credo and the credo of the Age of Enlightenment in which he lived.

In Orpheus and Eurydice, first staged in Vienna in 1762, Gluck tackled what was and arguably still is the primal operatic tale, with its (misplaced?) faith in the power of music to snatch love back from the arms of death. Because the work's premiere was given in celebration of the emperor's name-day, Gluck provided it with a particularly spirited, festive Overture (not to mention a rather forced happy ending). But in most respects, the opera realized its goals of clarity and dramatic coherence with a plot that unfolds logically and with a previously unheard-of "realism" and psychological depth.

In the context of the opera, the Overture's C-major brilliance provided a foil for the opening scene's mourning gloom. For its concert setting, we provide a similarly light-to-dark, if rhythmically very different, contrast by following the Overture with the "Dance of the Furies." Gluck added this entr'acte to the 1774 Paris revival of the opera by recasting the D minor "descent into Hell" that concluded his 1761 ballet, Don Juan. Amidst all his other innovations, Gluck was perhaps most importantly the first opera composer to make extensive dramatic use of the minor modes: the original version of this dance literally began the musical Sturm und Drang style that Haydn later made famous.

Gluck's Furies occupy a "horrid and cavernous place beyond the river Cocythus," as the 1764 printed score described it, "obfuscated with dark smoke illuminated by flames, which fill the entire horrible abode." To dance in such a place was to create, as H. C. Robbins Landon put it, "the first piece of music to describe real fear." But not, alas, the last.

To give a full sense of Gluck's expressive range, we conclude with the idyllic "Dance of the Blessed Spirits," a tableau described in the original score as occurring in a "delightful place with verdant bushes and flowers that cover the meadows, and shady nooks, plus rivers and streams that bathe them." The Paris composer Gabriel Pierné ascribed another first to Gluck with this piece, calling it "the first creation of a truly musical atmosphere." After encountering the Furies, one can only hope the Blessed Spirits endure.

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By education, Joseph Martin Kraus (1756-1792) was very much a child of the Enlightenment, having spent most of his adolescence and young adulthood at the Jesuit school in Mannheim and at universities in Mainz, Erfurt, and Göttingen, where he studied classical literature, music, philosophy, and law. Yet he also composed symphonies, songs, and choral music, wrote and published a volume

of lyric poetry and a three-act tragedy, and bred dogs to supplement his family's income, all before the age of 20!

Though intended by his family for a career in law, three events served to steer Kraus towards a musical career instead. One was the painful experience of seeing his father, an administrator of justice, forced to defend himself against charges of abuse of office, charges eventually proven false. Another came after Kraus transferred to Göttingen University in 1776, and was much more positive: he joined the Göttinger Hainbund, a literary circle devoted to Sturm und Drang. The effect was electrifying. With the encouragement of his new friends, Kraus began composing in earnest, and soon wrote a treatise, Something of and about music for the year 1777, in which he developed a theory for adapting the literary philosophy of Sturm und Drang to musical composition, and made clear his admiration for the operas of C. W. Gluck.

But the final push came early in 1778, when a Swedish friend urged him to go to Stockholm to seek employment as a composer in the court of King Gustav III, a highly intellectual monarch who was busy hiring important artists from all over Europe. In April, with his new book in press at Frankfurt, Kraus wrote a farewell letter to his parents and left Göttingen for Sweden.

It would be three impoverished years before he succeeded in catching the king's attention. In 1780, a commission came through for an opera, Proserpin, on a libretto outlined by the king himself. After the premiere in June 1781, Kraus wrote home: "The court was extraordinarily delighted with it . . . Immediately after the conclusion of the music, the King conversed with me for over a quarter of an hour: gave me a very nice compliment, asked me about this and that, and looked me over from head to foot with his large eyes. And I, in my old, praiseworthy manner, took the liberty of staring holes in the great monarch. And that, as I later learned, pleased him greatly."

So greatly that the King appointed him deputy Kapellmeister and, the following year, sent him on a grand tour of Europe at Royal expense! Charged with assessing the current state of music and theater, Kraus spent four years travelling through Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy, England, and France. During a six-month stay in Vienna in 1783, he finally met Gluck, who looked over several of his scores and later commented, "That man has great style!" He also visited Joseph Haydn at Eszterháza, who conducted Kraus's newly-completed Symphony in C minor, VB 142. Haydn later called it "a work that will be considered a masterpiece for centuries to come."

The years on tour were the happiest of Kraus's life. In Italy, the world-renowned composer and teacher Padre Martini, pushing 80 and with only months to live, took such a liking to the youngster he commissioned a portrait of Kraus for his library! In London, Kraus revelled in the musical celebrations of Handel's centennial. And in Paris, he received symphonic commissions from the famous Concerts Spirituel. By the time he returned to Stockholm late in 1786, the first signs of the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him were being felt. But Kraus never slowed down. He soon received the King's appointment as Royal Kapellmeister, at twice his previous salary. Composing, conducting, and teaching at the Royal Academy of

Music kept him extremely busy. Kraus was able to put the finishing touches on his masterpiece, an enormous opera called Æneas in Carthage, though he didn't live to see it produced. In March 1792, his beloved patron, King Gustav, was assassinated at a masked ball. Kraus, who only days before had completed his Elegy Öfver Mozarts död, turned to writing a Symphonie funèbre and a burial cantata for the slain king. Eight months later, Kraus followed his sovereign, dying on 15 December 1792 at the age of 36.

At a time when concert programs often feature works by the teenaged Mozart, what better foil than to present an early work by Kraus, his exact contemporary! The Sinfonia buffa in F major, VB 129, has been dated by the Kraus scholar Bertil van Boer to his Mannheim years, 1768-1772, which means that he could not have been older than 16 when he wrote it. Patterned after Italian opera sinfonias, and clearly showing the early influence of Gluck, Kraus's work resembles a comic opera in instrumental miniature, with much dashing about, hair-breadth escapes, romantic reversals, idyllic interludes. Though played without a break, the three movements are clearly delineated, with the first ending on a rising triad that poses a musical question. The slow second movement answers with a chant-like opening and sudden changes from major to minor that add a haunted air to the drama. But the finale throws open the windows and lets a breeze in with virtuoso flutes and thrumming pizzicato strings, a triumphant promenade, and a skewed fragment of Gregorian chant wandering through like a lost mendicant monk at a garden party. We hope this light-hearted romp will whet your appetite for exploring Kraus's later works, which are finally beginning to receive the attention they so richly deserve (we recommend the wonderful series of recordings devoted to his symphonies on the budget label Naxos).

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With Mozart, sometimes the barest statement of fact is enough to amaze: for example, that he wrote his last three symphonies, considered to be his greatest works in the form, during a six-week period in the summer of 1788. It's like Faulkner writing As I Lay Dying in six weeks. It exalts us to be unequivocally reminded that human nature can be both so positive and so powerful. To then learn that Faulkner wrote his masterpiece while working twelve hours a day, six days a week at a Mississippi power plant humbles us, to be sure, but in a way that can be strangely cleansing, that can allow us to see in a new light the figure of our own achievements against the ground of our daily lives. It's true with Mozart too, when we peer into the riot of his life during that extraordinary long-ago summer.

Reactions to the Vienna premiere of Don Giovanni in May 1788 had been decidedly mixed, with many regarding it as over-long, artificial, and much too elaborate. Though Mozart was well-paid for the opera, work on it had taken up so much of his time that he found himself falling steadily behind in his debts. Encounters with irate creditors became an almost daily occurrence.

In June, he began the infamous series of letters to his friend and fellow Mason, the textile-maker Michael Puchberg, begging for money, to which Puchberg intermittently responded with loans always smaller than requested. On June 17th, to save money, Mozart and his family - his wife, Constanze, their four-year-old son,

Carl, and infant daughter, Theresia - left the apartment they'd moved into only seven months before for a smaller one farther from the city center. On the 26th, he finished the first of his final three symphonies, No. 39 in E flat, intended, like the ones to follow, for a concert series planned for year's end - a series he hoped the fickle Viennese would find more enticing than his indifferently attended piano concerto recitals of years past.
For months Mozart had repeatedly advertised for subscribers for manuscript copies of a recent set of three string quintets, but the response had been so paltry he was forced in late June to take out an ad admitting the lack of interest and postponing "publication" of the works.

This public humiliation was followed on June 29th by personal tragedy: the death of baby Theresia, aged just six months. Though one might assume her death contributed directly to the dark mood of Symphony No. 40 in G minor, begun within days, it's hard to be certain, given the bright and carefree quality of other works he was writing at the same time, sonatas for piano and violin and a piano trio, all written in late June and early July. Granted, all but the trio were begun before Theresia's death, and Mozart often immersed himself in his work in the face of external crises. On the other hand, we know that, years before, he had incorporated his wife's labor cries (that child too was short-lived) into the Andante and Menuetto of the D minor string quartet, K. 421, and no matter how common the loss of a child may have been, the loss of his only daughter might well have inspired Mozart's most profoundly troubled symphonic reflections. In any event, the G minor symphony was completed less than a month later, on July 25th, 1788, despite "black thoughts" banished only "with great effort," as the composer wrote that month in yet another desperate letter to Puchberg.

The miracle, then, might well be that Mozart was able to follow his darkest symphony with one so honestly ablaze with light and joyful invention. Symphony No. 41 is in C major, the brightest, most celebratory of keys (for Joseph Haydn, who wrote over a dozen symphonies in that key, it was always an occasion for breaking out the kettle drums). Yet Mozart, never content with received musical wisdom, surpasses himself with the sheer variety of types of expression, tone, and style he manages to explore and to unify within his classical frame.

For all the call-and-response fanfare of the opening, whose stately rhythms might have suggested the title "Jupiter" that the London impresario Johann Peter Salomon appended to the work in the early 19th century, the movement's character ranges widely. At exposition's end, Mozart quotes his own comic aria, "Un bacio di mano" ("A kiss on the hand"), K. 541, in which a worldly Frenchman ponders the dangers of courting beautiful young women - a topic perhaps of little interest to the ruler of the gods, but of delightful consequence here. A false recapitulation sets in motion an extraordinary sequence of modulations around the fanfare motif, as if Mozart were turning a gem in the light, to see what new depths each new angle might reveal.

The Andante slow movement, commencing in elegance, soon clouds over, veering into an impassioned C minor, and eventually emerges again into the light, strangely untroubled, its opening elegance immeasurably enriched. Mozart's meditation on maintaining one's inner equanimity through troubling times,

perhaps? The strongly chromatic minuet that follows, despite its martial trimmings, could hardly be less "Olympian" in tone.

Yet Salomon's title for the symphony is perhaps most apt in reference to the Finale, not because of any regal display, but because it could be said to embody in its structure the egalitarian ideals that so transfigured Europe, for better and worse, during the Age of Enlightenment. For Jupiter, god of light, of the sky and weather, was also the god of the state, of its welfare and its laws, and thus represented its ideal condition.

Unusual for being in sonata form (a structural complexity usually reserved for a symphony's opening movement), Mozart's Molto allegro finale is highly contrapuntal, at times fugal. What is extraordinary is that he builds the music up out of the most pedestrian of thematic elements, beginning with a four-note motive that composers had been using for centuries, including Mozart himself, who used it at age eight in the very first symphony he wrote! This is followed by a profusion of ideas explored and elaborated with such brilliance that their mundane origins are utterly transcended. In the coda, Mozart gathers all five of his principal themes and weaves them together, an effortless interlacing that ends with kettledrums and trumpets in full roar. Indeed, as Mozart's greatest biographer, Robert W. Gutman, makes clear, this Finale is the very apogee of the mature Mozartean style, "a tour de force whose accumulating contrapuntal intricacies call to mind the conclusion of Shakespeare's Cymbeline [yet another work written brilliantly on the fly], in which an astonishing variety of plot, counterplot, and subplot all converge and reach denouement within an overarching structure of universal pardon (Jupiter, in fact, presides over the reconciliations from on high)."

Mozart completed his final symphony on August 10th, 1788. Two weeks later, the visiting Danish actor Joachim Daniel Preisler paid a Sunday call on the composer at home, and wrote: "This small man and great master improvised twice on a pianoforte with pedal, and so wonderfully, so wonderfully it staggered belief! He interwove the most difficult passages with the loveliest themes. His wife cut quill pens for the copyist, a pupil composed, and a little boy of four walked about the garden singing recitatives. In short, everything surrounding this splendid man was musical!"