

DESTINATION GENIUS

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

TIMELINKS

1784-88

MOZART

Piano Concerto No. 17 in G major, K. 453

Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551, "Jupiter"

Revolutionary ideas and actions stir in France

1953-55

TIPPETT

Fantasia concertante on a Theme of Corelli

LUTOSŁAWSKI

Dance Preludes

United States develops hydrogen bomb

Does genius have a particular age? Is talent that comes to full fruition later in life any less valid than that which springs forth in youth? Those are questions posed by the contrasting composers whose works are presented this weekend. Granted, Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 17, K. 453, is a work from the middle, more or less, of his too-short life, and the "Jupiter" Symphony comes from the end. But as a boy, he was the prodigy of all prodigies, playing piano at age three, composing at five, and touring Europe not long after. Lutosławski and Tippett, meanwhile, came to the serious study and pursuit of music later in life and more as a conscious choice than a preternatural outpouring. Yet they, too, became celebrated for their great works, suggesting that, though brilliance in music may be found while traveling many different roads, it's possible for those roads to end up at the same destination.

WITOLD LUTOSŁAWSKI

Dance Preludes

FATE Witold Lutosławski was slow to come into his full powers as a composer, but the reasons for his late development were not so much musical as political.

Blame it on the era and milieu of the first few decades of his life. Born to a family of Polish landed gentry in 1913, Lutosławski was still a small child when, in 1918, his father and uncle were branded as counterrevolutionaries and executed by the Bolsheviks.

A pianist at age six and violinist at 13, Lutosławski wavered between music and math studies, but finally took a Conservatory degree in piano in 1936 and one in composition in 1937. Caught up soon after in World War II, he was captured by the Germans but escaped to Warsaw, where he made do not as a composer and classical musician, but rather as a café pianist, at one point even forming a duo with another aspiring Polish composer, Andrzej Panufnik.

When the Communists took control of Poland after the war, Lutosławski—a modernist at heart—saw his work, notably 1949’s *Symphony No. 1*, denounced as “formalist” and he was forced to shy away from any experimental tendencies. Instead, he drew inspiration from Polish folk songs, a move the regime no doubt found considerably more palatable.

FORTUNE As Stalinist restrictions receded in the early ’50s, however, Poland began to thaw creatively, and Lutosławski was free to test his wings, first with his *Concerto for Orchestra*, which was based on folk elements, but also emphasized form, thus—as tactfully as possible—spitting in the eye of authorities who had held him back. For his part, Lutosławski exuded extreme tact, claiming he had never felt compelled to compose in one manner or another. Nevertheless, from that point forward, he mostly moved on to more purely modernist works.

But not before composing his *Dance Preludes* (1955), a brief work Lutosławski referred to as his “farewell to folklore.” The piece draws on five northern Polish folk songs (or indeed, folk *rhythms*, as no specific songs have ever been cited as direct source material). It was commissioned by Tadeusz Ochlewski, the director of PWM Edition in Krakow, who wanted a cycle of folk-based pieces for violin and piano that would be suitable for players in secondary schools.

Vexed by composing the work for violin, Lutosławski turned instead to writing for the clarinet and piano. As for the level of skill required to play it, he found that a bit off, too. “[The *Dance Preludes*] were appropriate for young clarinetists,” he said, “but posed difficulties for the accompanists.”

Somehow, the accompanists seem to have managed. Lutosławski—who in later years took his place among Poland’s preeminent composers—subsequently revised *Dance Preludes* for orchestra, and it has become one of his most frequently performed pieces.



Born

January 25, 1913, Warsaw

Died

February 9, 1994, Warsaw

First Performance

June 1963, at Aldeburgh Festival; Gervase de Peyer was the clarinet soloist, and Benjamin Britten conducted the English Chamber Orchestra

STL Symphony Premiere

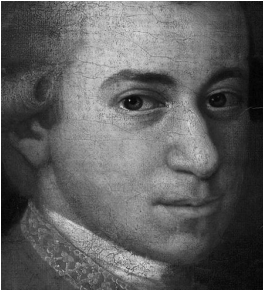
January 26, 2007, Scott Andrews was soloist, with Vassily Sinaisky conducting the only previous performance

Scoring

solo clarinet
timpani
percussion
harp
piano
strings

Performance Time

approximately 11 minutes



WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Piano Concerto No. 17 in G major, K. 453

Born

January 27, 1756, Salzburg

Died

December 5, 1791, Vienna

First Performance

June 13, 1784, in Vienna; Mozart's student Babette Ployer was the soloist, and the composer almost certainly conducted the small orchestra hired for this occasion

STL Symphony Premiere

January 10, 1969, Malcolm Frager was soloist, with Peter Eros conducting

Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

November 13, 2005, Piotr Anderszewski was soloist, with Philippe Jordan conducting

Scoring

solo piano
flute
2 oboes
2 bassoons
2 horns
strings

Performance Time

approximately 30 minutes

DESIRE From 1784-86 Mozart wrote a dozen piano concertos, a burst of creativity that is evidence not merely of his genius, but also his need. Several years earlier he had left his court appointment in Salzburg and moved to Vienna to become perhaps the first freelance musician, surviving on commissions, performances, and published works alone. He had also married Constanze Weber, which not only made his life more chaotic but also darkened his financial outlook.

But in the period under discussion, Mozart was more than up to the task. Viennese society was taken with their new resident genius, and from February to April 1784 alone, Mozart wrote four of the piano concertos (including the G major), a violin sonata and the Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, and gave 22 concerts. It's exhausting to even contemplate, let alone accomplish. Yet that is how Mozart's Viennese heyday played out: when need opened its hand, Mozart's genius filled it. At least for a time.

GIFT The Allegro of the G-major Concerto is lyrical and inventive, at times veering unexpectedly into other keys. The Andante in C major, meanwhile, is slower, darker, and dramatic. The Allegretto offers a simple theme in five variations, followed by a finale (Presto).

That theme is the subject of one of the more extraordinary tales told about Mozart's extraordinary life. A few weeks before the premiere of the G-major Concerto, Mozart purchased a pet starling that he taught to whistle the tune featured in the Allegretto. Apparently, it held one note too long, and sang others a bit sharp, but Mozart was charmed nonetheless. How could one not be? More fanciful tellings of the story hold that it was the bird that gave the melody to Mozart. It seems unlikely, however, that the relentlessly gifted and prodigiously prolific composer would need any avian assistance beyond mere companionship.

SIR MICHAEL TIPPETT

Fantasia concertante on a Theme of Corelli

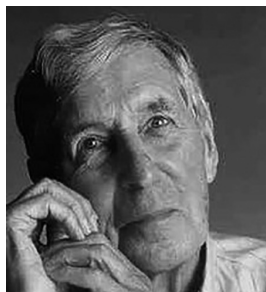
LATE Much like Witold Lutosławski, British composer Michael Tippett was a late bloomer. He did not begin to study music seriously until his late teens and, also like Lutosławski, was in and out of the musical academy—in Tippett's case, Britain's Royal Academy of Music. Tippett did not produce his first substantial piece until age 30, and another decade would pass before anyone took any real interest in his work.

Good things would come later in life: not just success and acclaim, starting with his breakthrough work, the opera *The Midsummer Marriage*, but a knighthood as well. Along with Benjamin Britten, Tippett today is recognized as Britain's most significant composer since World War II.

SPARK Tippett's *Fantasia concertante on a Theme of Corelli* was commissioned by the Edinburgh Festival in 1953, to celebrate the tercentenary of Corelli's birth. Although Tippett was not particularly a fan or student of Corelli's work, the combination of composer and subject matter was an inspired one, as Tippett's previous works showed a genius for building on elements of earlier styles to achieve something new and exciting.

For Tippett, the spark that ignited his fire for Corelli was a section of the composer's *Concerto grosso*, op. 6, no. 2—a solemn *Adagio* in F minor, followed by a sprightly *Vivace*. A dedicated Jungian, Tippett saw within the excerpt a concept of “dark and light,” which he would strive to reconcile in nearly all of his life's work.

Beginning with Corelli's Baroque melody, the piece offers seven variations before moving into a fugue that cleverly incorporates part of Bach's organ fugue in B minor, itself built on a musical snippet borrowed from Corelli). As the music grows more lush, it moves thematically from darkness to light, climaxes in a rapturous section that recalls his own *The Midsummer Marriage*, and returns to Corelli's melody from the opening.



Born

January 2, 1905, London

Died

January 8, 1998, London

First Performance

August 29, 1953, at the Edinburgh Festival, the composer conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra

STL Symphony Premiere

October 21, 2005, with violinists Heidi Harris and Kristin Ahlstrom, and cellist Melissa Brooks, Nicholas McGegan conducting the only previous STL Symphony performance

Scoring

2 solo violins
solo cello
2 string orchestras

Performance Time

approximately 19 minutes



WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551 “Jupiter”

First Performance

Unknown

STL Symphony Premiere

December 30, 1910, Max Zach conducting

Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

February 12, 2011, Bernard Labadie conducting

Scoring

flute
2 oboes
2 bassoons
2 horns
2 trumpets
timpani
strings

Performance Time

approximately 31 minutes

SPEED If the rapidity with which Mozart wrote the Piano Concerto No. 17, one of a dozen that he wrote in the span of two years, is astonishing, the pace at which he composed his final three symphonies—No. 39 in E-flat major, No. 40 in G minor, and No. 41 in C major (a.k.a. “Jupiter”)—is positively dumbfounding.

All three—each of them supreme works, among the best and most brilliant symphonies produced by anyone ever—were written in the span of roughly two months in the summer of 1788. And he did this while the quotidian disasters that plagued his life continued apace. He still had to teach; his wife was ill; one of their children, a daughter, had recently died; Viennese society, which once had celebrated him, had tired of his work and his grating personality; and he was forever in dire straits financially. How was it possible to juggle all of this at once? It still boggles the mind.

So, too, does the fact that all three symphonies were written without a commission or a particular future performance in mind. The stuff apparently just poured out of him.

LAST The origin of the sobriquet “Jupiter” is unknown, though it is assumed that the noble sweep of the music, especially the grandeur of the first movement, put listeners in mind of the Roman king of the gods.

The middle two movements are exceptional as well, but it is the fourth movement’s finale that is most beloved and revered. In it, Mozart holds nothing back, presenting no fewer than six distinct themes that finally unite in breathtaking fashion.

Mozart could not have known that this would be his last symphony, but perhaps it is fitting that it was. With it, he reached the zenith of his work, and it’s hard to imagine where he would have gone from this point forward. But it’s impossible to say that he wouldn’t have found a way to top it. Mozart seemingly always managed to take music to a higher level, and might have yet again had his early death not rendered the question moot.