

MOZART: Symphony No. 41, “Jupiter”

Notes on the Program

By Noel Morris ©2020

Arguably more than any other composer, Mozart’s music causes people to contemplate the divine.

There are many quotes to this effect. Albert Einstein put it this way: “Mozart is the greatest composer of all. Beethoven created his music, but the music of Mozart is of such purity and beauty that one feels he merely found it—that it has always existed as part of the inner beauty of the universe waiting to be revealed.”

The “Jupiter” Symphony is a marvel; an expansive and majestic rock of perfection that seems to occupy a realm beyond the messy and tormented mass of humanity.

Put this symphony side-by-side with portraits of Mozart wearing powdered wigs, “beautiful clothing, lace, and watch chains,” as biographer George Nissen described him, one wonders if his feet ever touched the ground.

In reality, Mozart had a potty mouth. He loved gambling, cards, billiards, wine, and women. He recklessly spent money yet remained devoted to God and family. And this is partly what makes the Jupiter Symphony so imponderable—this paragon of balance, beauty, and order came from a thoroughly disordered and earthy existence.

There is one clue to the “Jupiter” Symphony: In the first movement, following the regal opening, Mozart inserted a jocular tune from his own song “A kiss on her hand.” The song taunts somebody with the words, “You are a little dull, my dear Pompeo. Go study the ways of the world.” Its appearance in the symphony evokes the sound of two opera characters trading jabs – a royal and a vulgarian. And this is an important feature of Mozart’s music: although he remained a slave to beauty, he covered the full range of the human experience.

With “Jupiter’s” finale, Mozart set the bar for all other musicians (and surely he knew it). Think of the popular Broadway trick of having two different characters singing simultaneously, each with his own melody. Mozart crafts “Jupiter’s” finale using five different themes and lays all five on top of one another in a fugue at the end. What other composer could touch that level of facility?

The nickname “Jupiter” was not Mozart’s choice. According to the diary of the British publisher Vincent Novello, Mozart’s son Franz Xaver had credited the London promoter Peter Salomon with linking this piece to the king of the gods. This is the last of Mozart’s symphonies, written during the summer of 1788 alongside the 39th and 40th Symphonies.



MOZART: “Jupiter” Symphony

Instrumentation:

1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani + strings

BEETHOVEN: Violin Concerto

Notes on the Program

“Inspirational bedlam.”

That’s how biographer Edmund Morris described Beethoven’s sketchbooks. In the early years of the 19th century, ideas poured out of him—fragments of music that would later show up in his symphonies and his concertos. When these little nuggets came to him, he’d jot them down on scraps of paper, bind them into books and sort them out later.

Music professors often refer to these years as Beethoven’s heroic decade – and with good reason. His output was transformational. He changed music, and became foundational for the musicians who followed.

Sadly, the bedlam described by Edmund Morris was not limited to Beethoven’s sketchbooks. Life in Vienna was hard; Napoleon had invaded the Austrian capital at the end of 1805 causing food shortages and disrupting much of Beethoven’s existence. Through 1806, he suffered chronic illness and profound hearing loss. On top of all that, there were many self-inflicted wounds: he had a spat with his theater manager and withdrew his opera. He quarreled with his brother and his publisher. He cycled through domestic help (not to mention apartments), and lost his stipend after an argument with his patron. (In some versions of the story, Beethoven threw a chair at the man.)

In spite of all this, Beethoven produced one landmark piece after another, including string quartets, the Fourth Symphony, and the Violin Concerto. At the same time he worked on of the Fifth Symphony and the Fourth Piano Concerto.

Beethoven wrote his Violin Concerto for an old friend who had caught his attention back in 1794. The composer had heard Franz Clement as a 14-year-old – a prodigy – and wrote some generous words of encouragement. Clement grew into a respected musician, and was elevated to the position of conductor and concertmaster of the Theater an der Wien in 1802. In that post, Clement helped Beethoven produce his opera *Fidelio* and conducted the premiere of the *Eroica* Symphony.



F. J. Clement
de Vienne
Virtuoso du Violon
à l'age de 8 ans.
Henri Regfelt. 1799.

Beethoven completed the Violin Concerto on the day of (or within a couple days, depending on the account) of the premiere, December 23, 1806, prompting some to speculate that Clement had given the performance without rehearsal. Beethoven gives us a clue about his affection for the soloist, adding an inside joke to the manuscript: “Concerto par Clemenza pour Clement,” Concerto for Clemency for Clement.

The Beethoven Violin Concerto languished until 1844 when another prodigy, the 12-year-old Joseph Joachim, performed it with Felix Mendelssohn as conductor. By that time, the public’s ears had caught up with Beethoven’s imagination. And the Concerto became a cornerstone of the violin repertoire.

BEETHOVEN: Violin Concerto

Instrumentation:

1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons - 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani + strings