

## WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Austrian composer (1756–1791)

Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466 (Estimated length: 28 minutes)

In the winter of 1785, Wolfgang Amadè Mozart was preparing music for a six-week series of subscription concerts. Mozart's father Leopold arrived for a visit the day before the first of these concerts, and wrote to his daughter Nannerl, "[On 11 February] we drove to his first subscription concert ... The concert was magnificent and the orchestra played splendidly ... we had a new and very fine concerto by Wolfgang, which the copyist was still copying as we arrived, and the rondo of which your brother did not even have time to play through, as he had to supervise the copying."

The Piano Concerto No. 20 is the first of only two of Mozart's piano concertos written in a minor key. The unusual choice of tonality hints at the melancholy turmoil that pervades all three movements. Several music historians, after extensive research, discovered that Mozart's use of D minor in his dramatic works, including the famous "Queen of the Night" aria from *The Magic Flute*, and the combat scenes in *Don Giovanni*, correspond with themes of death, vengeance and the threat of hell. One historian suggests that Mozart's D minor compositions reflect Mozart's attitude towards Leopold, with whom Mozart had a contentious relationship. Whatever the key of D minor meant to Mozart, it was clearly a deliberate choice on the composer's part. The opening notes of the Allegro seethe with anger, growling out a churning, restless theme that gathers strength like an approaching storm.

At the end of Milos Forman's 1984 film *Amadeus*, composer Antonio Salieri, played by F. Murray Abraham, finishes recounting his story to a hapless priest in an insane asylum. Salieri tells the priest, "I will speak for you. I speak for all mediocrities; I am their champion. I am their patron saint." As Salieri is wheeled through the halls, he blesses his fellow inmates: "Mediocrities everywhere, I absolve you." In the background, growing steadily louder is the sublime opening of the Romance, music so exquisitely perfect that it emphasizes, with knife-like precision, the vast gulf separating Mozart's genius from Salieri's mundane competence.

The Romance's soothing respite is torn to shreds by the piano's furious introduction to the Allegro assai. This movement, in the form of a rondo (a repeating theme separated by contrasting short sections), simultaneously elevates the soloist's role with a dizzying series of runs, and reinforces the tempestuous, unsettled nature of the music. The counter-theme, with its flippant nyah-nyah-nyah ornaments, suggests a sardonic, even vindictive, state of mind; these are not emotions we usually associate with Mozart's music. It is no wonder, then, that 19<sup>th</sup> century composers, particularly Beethoven, venerated this concerto as a harbinger of the personal, expressive style that characterizes the Romantic era.

## GUSTAV MAHLER

Austrian composer (1860–1911)

Symphony No. 4 in G Major (Estimated length: 55 minutes)

All of Gustav Mahler's symphonies are distinct sound worlds, and each has a specific premise or subtext. Of the Fourth Symphony, Mahler told a friend, "I only wanted to write a symphonic Humoresque, and out of it came a symphony of normal dimensions." What Mahler meant by "normal dimensions" isn't clear, but the Fourth Symphony, which explores the world of childhood, is known as Mahler's most accessible symphony (and one of his shortest, at just

under one hour). Considering its approachability, it is interesting to note that Mahler also described the Fourth Symphony as “fundamentally different from my other symphonies.” The first three movements are built around and culminate with the fourth, a setting of a poem from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy’s Magic Horn). *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* is a collection of poems gathered, arranged, and otherwise tinkered with by the poets Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano in the early 1800s. Mahler set a number of these poems in the 1890s; among them was *Der Himmel hängt voll Geigen* (Heaven is Hung with Violins), which Mahler renamed *Das himmlische Leben* (The Heavenly Life). It is a child’s concept of Heaven: full of music, dancing and other innocent pleasure, as well as a feast of delicious foods. Various saints people Heaven, including Peter, Martha, Ursula, and Cecilia, the patron saint of music. The Fourth Symphony is the last of Mahler’s *Wunderhorn* Symphonies (he used melodies from settings of other *Wunderhorn* songs in each of his three previous symphonies), and, with the exception of the finale, the most obviously Classical. The first movement is in traditional sonata-allegro form, the second movement is a Scherzo, while the third features a theme and variations. Mahler’s orchestration is delicately buoyant, with an emphasis on higher range instruments (suggesting children’s voices), minus trombones and tuba. The sleigh bells, which ring in the opening of the symphony, tinkle throughout the first movement, with their suggestions of winter and Christmas. The solo violin serves as a musical narrator, taking on different characters and qualities in each movement.

“Life in heaven is the tapering spire of the edifice of this Fourth Symphony,” said Mahler. He also expressed the hope that the Fourth Symphony would “bring me the only reward which I want from my work: to be heard and understood.” Unfortunately, as often happened with Mahler’s music, critics of the time were not psychologically equipped to “hear and understand” a composer who was in many ways far ahead of his time. Instead, Mahler’s critics were all too willing to attack the Fourth Symphony for what they perceived as its artificial naïveté and cloying homage to childhood. Mahler-as-sunny-optimist clearly didn’t conform to what critics and audiences expected from the death-obsessed composer of the *Resurrection* Symphony. In a letter to Julius Butts in 1903, Mahler lamented the negative reaction to the Fourth Symphony, describing it as “this persecuted step-child that has so far known so little joy in the world.” Fortunately, one of Mahler’s contemporaries, writer and musician Arthur Seidl, did understand the Fourth Symphony. In his 1901 review, Seidl observed, “Mahler is a real ‘God Seeker.’ His most secret inner being contemplates the immensity of nature with a really religious fervor; he is inexorably drawn toward the enigma of existence ... it is the critics who consider him with an ironic eye and find only affectation in his music; it is they who are stubborn and who cannot find the key to his naïve and childlike world!”