

Wolfgang Amadè Mozart

Symphony No. 29 in A, K.201(186a)

JOANNES CHRISOSTOMUS WOLFGANG GOTTLIEB MOZART—WHO BEGAN CALLING HIMSELF WOLFGANGO AMADEO ABOUT 1770 AND WOLFGANG AMADEÙ IN 1777 (HE USED “AMADEUS” ONLY IN JEST)—WAS BORN IN SALZBURG, AUSTRIA, ON JANUARY 27, 1756, AND DIED IN VIENNA ON DECEMBER 5, 1791. HE COMPOSED HIS SYMPHONY NO. 29 IN SALZBURG IN 1774 (THE MANUSCRIPT IS DATED APRIL 6 OF THAT YEAR), AND IT WOULD CERTAINLY HAVE BEEN PERFORMED IN SALZBURG AT THAT TIME, THOUGH NO DATE OF PERFORMANCE IS KNOWN.

THE SCORE OF MOZART’S SYMPHONY NO. 29 CALLS FOR JUST TWO OBOES, TWO HORNS, AND STRINGS.

We tend to think of a symphony as a particularly demanding, large-scale orchestral work that will serve as the high point, and sometimes even the only piece, on an orchestral program—a view developed during the nineteenth century, largely owing to the work of Beethoven. Especially before the last quarter of the eighteenth century, however, the notion of “symphony” was normally altogether less imposing, and it was most often considered merely preparation for a main event, such as an opera or oratorio. During the last years of the eighteenth century, though, Haydn and Mozart wrote symphonies that were clearly independent entities demanding attention in a way that many earlier symphonies did not. The character of the instrumental writing grew more complex and virtuosic, the ideas became bolder and more dramatic, and sudden shifts of key, rhythm, dynamics, and mood gave the symphony a more dramatic character. The process was not, perhaps, entirely intentional on the composers’ part, and it took place over a period of decades. But there are certain high-water marks along the way, scores that capture a new level of seriousness and complexity (attributes that often revealed themselves in music of considerable wit). One such score is the Mozart symphony conventionally identified as No. 29 in A major.

Like so many of Mozart’s Salzburg symphonies, this one exists with virtually no indication of the reason why Mozart might have composed it. It is part of a massive outpouring of symphonies in the early 1770s, mostly for the relatively small forces available to Mozart in Salzburg. (It was only after visiting Mannheim in 1778 that he wrote to his father, “Ah, if only we too had clarinets! You cannot imagine the glorious effect of a symphony with flutes, oboes, and clarinets.”) But even though he was limited in the size and instrumentation of his orchestra, Mozart’s symphonies seem to be aiming at this time in the direction of greater weight and significance. In the symphony in A this weight can be seen partly in Mozart’s decision to compose three of the four movements (all except the Menuetto) in the shape that we call sonata form, generally regarded as a serious or intellectual approach. Each of these sonata-form movements has two substantial sections—the exposition and the development-recapitulation complex—that are supposed to be repeated, and in all three of these movements Mozart adds a further element of weight with a coda that brings the movement to a close. In addition, Mozart seems to be intent on fusing some chamber music elements (especially the independent part-writing) with the older symphonic tradition. He may have developed this interest under the influence of Haydn, who was experimenting in many of the same ways early in the 1770s.

The first movement is striking in its complete avoidance of the customary display of fanfares and dramatic bow-strokes to open the work. Indeed, it begins with the presentation of a sober argument—a quiet octave leap in the violins, followed by a gradually climbing figure in eighth-notes, all of this supported by the lower strings in a contrapuntal style that suggests the character of church music. When the phrase ends, the material begins a repetition, but now *forte*, with sustained octaves in the wind instruments and an imitation between upper and lower strings on the main theme. Mozart arrives with remarkable promptness at the new key and presents a whole series of new thematic ideas of varying character. The development is animated

by running scale passages, and the recapitulation brings back all of the varied material of the exposition, now in the home key. The coda recalls the imitation of the opening once again.

Both the second and third movements are built on themes emphasizing dotted rhythms, a characteristic of much French music in the late eighteenth century, where it was considered especially stately. The slow movement is given over largely to the muted strings, with occasional support or echoing from the woodwinds, which act to enrich the string quartet texture. The Menuetto provides graceful contrasts of color and dynamics while concentrating single-mindedly (in the main section) on one rhythmic pattern.

The finale, *Allegro con spirito*, is really filled with spirit and fire. The measured tremolos, the trills, the racing scales up or down all keep the level of activity high, with only the slightest trace of relaxation for the secondary theme. Each of the major sections—exposition, development, and recapitulation—ends with a breathtaking upward scale to nothing. Has everything come to a grinding halt? But no! After a heartbeat's pause, the racing figure continues in the next section of the piece. At the end of the recapitulation, this racing figure continues in a bold orchestral unison to the final energetic phrases. One more rushing scale to silence—and Mozart's *jeu d'esprit* comes to its breathless conclusion.

Steven Ledbetter