

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born January 27, 1756 in Salzburg; died December 5, 1791 in Vienna

Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550 (1788)

PREMIERE OF WORK: unknown

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 24 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns and strings

At no time was the separation between Mozart's personal life and his transcendent music more apparent than in the summer of 1788, when, at the age of 32, he had only three years to live. His wife was ill and his own health was beginning to fail; his six-month-old daughter died on July 29th; *Don Giovanni* was given a disappointing reception at its Viennese premiere on May 7th; he had small prospect of participating in any important concerts; and he was so impoverished and indebted that he would not answer a knock on the door for fear of finding a creditor there. Yet, amid all these difficulties, he produced, in less than two months, the three crowning jewels of his orchestral output, the Symphonies Nos. 39, 40 and 41. The G minor alone of the last three symphonies may reflect the composer's distressed emotional state at the time. It is among those great works of Mozart that look forward to the passionately charged music of the 19th century while epitomizing the structural elegance of the waning Classical era.

The Symphony's pervading mood of tragic restlessness is established immediately at the outset by a simple, arpeggiated figure in the violas above which the violins play the agitated main theme. This melody is repeated with added woodwind chords to lead through a stormy transition to the second theme. After a moment of silence, a contrasting, lyrical melody is shared by strings and winds. The respite from the movement's driving energy provided by the dulcet second theme is brief, however, and tension soon mounts again. The wondrous development section gives prominence to the fragmented main theme. The recapitulation returns the earlier themes in heightened settings. The *Andante*, in sonata form, uses rich chromatic harmonies and melodic half-steps to create a mood of brooding intensity and portentous asceticism. Because of its somber minor-key harmonies, powerful irregular phrasing and dense texture, the *Minuet* was judged by Arturo Toscanini to be one of the most darkly tragic pieces ever written. The character of the *Minuet* is emphasized by its contrast with the central trio, the only untroubled portion of the entire work. The finale opens with a rocket theme that revives the insistent rhythmic energy of the first movement. The gentler second theme, with a full share of piquant chromatic inflections, slows the hurtling motion only briefly. The development section exhibits a contrapuntal ingenuity that few late-18th-century composers could match in technique and none surpass in musicianship. The recapitulation maintains the Symphony's tragic mood to the close.