

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

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

Serenade No. 6 in D major for Two Small Orchestras, K. 239, “Serenata Notturna” (1776)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Salzburg, early 1776

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 14 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: strings and timpani

The late-18th-century “evening piece” — the *Serenade* — like its close relatives, the *Divertimento*, *Cassation* and *Notturmo*, was music for entertainment. Such compositions were ordered by the wealthy of Mozart’s time along with the catering and the party decorations for their wedding receptions, family reunions, dinner parties and other festive gatherings, and were performed as background music to the meal (as a sort of 18th-century Muzak), or to accompany the promenading of the guests as they exchanged pleasantries, or to provide the centerpiece of the occasion’s entertainment. The *Serenade*, etc. were popular at garden parties during the summer, where wind instruments were especially favored because of their sturdy sound and throughout the year in the ballrooms of palaces and elegant homes, where the individual movements were often separated by long pauses to allow for conversation, refreshment, flirtation and similar amusements.

The occasion or patron for which the delightful *Serenade No. 6* — the “*Serenata Notturna*” (so called by Mozart on the title page) — was composed is unknown. Since the score was completed in chilly Salzburg in January 1776, it was certainly not written for a garden party, and may have been intended for some now-forgotten New Year’s celebration or perhaps for one of the events of the upcoming Carnival. (Mozart loved the masked balls that were the highlight of the pre-Lenten season.) The work is scored for two small “orchestras,” one comprising four soloists: two violins, viola and double bass; the other, two violins, viola, cello (without bass) and timpani. These paired performing forces were probably placed in opposite corners of the room, answering each other in an antiphonal manner. Mozart’s interest in such spatial pieces was exercised again exactly one year later, when he wrote the echo-filled *Notturmo* for Four Orchestras (K. 286) for New Years Day, 1777. (The ballroom scene at the end of Act I of *Don Giovanni* uses a similar multi-orchestra device to stunning dramatic effect.) The *Serenata Notturna* comprises three compact movements: a genteel march (with a timpani solo!) better suited to crinolines than to khakis; a country-dance minuet; and a spirited rondo, one of whose episodes probably quotes two rustic melodies familiar to the Salzburgers of the time, but which are now forgotten. This music, lighthearted and perfectly formed, must have well pleased its first hearers, if the words of one late-18th-century visitor to the city are to be believed: “Here everyone breathes the spirit of fun and mirth. People smoke, dance, make music and indulge in riotous revelry. I have yet to see another place where one can with so little money enjoy so much sensuousness.”