

## Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

### Overture to *La gazza ladra*

Composed in 1817

Premiered on May 31, 1817 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Born in Pesaro, Italy; February 29, 1792

Died in Passy, France; November 13, 1868

**This work was first performed by the Charlotte Symphony on November 21, 1960 with Henry Janiec conducting at Ovens Auditorium. The tenth and most recent performance set was on September 27 & 28, 2002 with Christof Perick conducting at the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.**

Gioachino Rossini's opera *La gazza ladra* (*The Thieving Magpie*) was one of the great triumphs of the Italian composer's illustrious career. The opera's libretto is based upon an 1815 play. The play, in turn, was derived from what appears to be a true story first related in a newspaper article. A young servant in the French village of Palasieau was accused of stealing a silver spoon. She was hanged for the offense. Later it was discovered that the spoon had been pilfered by a magpie. It became a yearly tradition in the village to pray for the unfortunate girl's soul, and the service became known as the "Magpie Mass." In Rossini's opera, the discovery of the magpie's theft takes place before the scheduled execution of the servant girl, and all ends happily.

*La Gazza Ladra*'s triumphant premiere occurred on May 31, 1817 at the La Scala Opera House in Milan. Present in the audience was the author Stendahl, who wrote that after the performance of the Overture:

...it would be almost impossible to describe the enthusiasm and the delirium of the Milanese audience on first hearing this masterpiece. The pit, having clapped and cheered to the echo, having shouted for five whole minutes on end, having in fact created such an uproar and pandemonium that no conceivable stretch of the imagination can visualize it, found itself in the end utterly exhausted...

Later that night at dinner, Rossini admitted to his friends that he "was utterly exhausted by the effort of bowing, literally hundreds of times, to an audience which, at every instant, had been interrupting the performance with its shouting and applause: *bravo maestro! evviva Rossini!*"

In time, the opera *La Gazza Ladra* lapsed into relative obscurity, although it has received some revivals in recent years. The Overture has enjoyed a much more consistent presence in the concert hall. From the bracing opening measures, with its arresting and

dramatic roll of the snare drum, to the stirring coda, the Overture to *The Thieving Magpie* is a thrilling orchestral tour-de-force.

*The score calls for flute and piccolo; oboes, clarinets, and bassoons in pairs; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion; and strings.*

Duration: c. 10 minutes

### **Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550**

Composed in 1788

Premiere date unknown

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born in Salzburg, Austria; January 27, 1756

Died in Vienna, Austria; December 5, 1791

**This work was first performed by the Charlotte Symphony on December 13, 1935 with Guillermo S. de Roxlo conducting at Alexander Graham Junior High School (now Middle School). The thirteenth and most recent performance set was on March 24 & 25, 2006 with Christof Perick conducting at the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.**

Mozart completed his final three Symphonies—No. 39 in E-flat Major, K. 543, No. 40 in G minor, K. 550, and No. 41 in C Major (“Jupiter”) K. 551—over the remarkably brief span between June 26 and August 10, 1788. Even more remarkable is the fact that these glorious Symphonies, among Mozart’s crowning achievements, were the product of a particularly distressing period in the composer’s life.

Mozart’s career in Vienna as a composer, teacher, virtuoso pianist, and impresario reached its apex in the mid-1780s. However, the exhilaration of those triumphant years soon yielded to profound frustration and unhappiness. Mozart experienced a sharp decline in the demands for his services in Vienna. In time, Mozart was reduced to begging for money from acquaintances—principally, Michael Puchberg, a fellow Mason and ardent music lover. Several of Mozart’s letters to Puchberg have survived, and they are indeed heartbreaking to read.

### **The mystery of Mozart’s final three Symphonies**

Mozart completed his G-minor Symphony, K. 550, on July 25, 1788 (the work is often referred to as the “Great,” to distinguish it from the 1773 “Little” G-minor Symphony, No. 25, K. 183). There exists no specific documentation that the G-minor—or, for that matter, any of the final three Symphonies—was performed during Mozart’s lifetime.

This fact has led some to theorize that Mozart composed these Symphonies not for monetary gain, but out of an overwhelming need to express himself in music. In this

context, the G-minor becomes a manifestation of the despair Mozart experienced during this difficult period in his life. Such a theory, of course, fails to explain what autobiographical elements are expressed in the high spirits of the E-flat Symphony, or in the heroic grandeur of the “Jupiter.”

Further, Mozart almost always composed large-scale works (such as piano concertos and symphonies) for specific, upcoming concerts. Correspondence from Mozart refers to subscription concerts scheduled for the summer of 1788. It is not certain whether these concerts ever took place. However, there is documentation of concerts conducted by Mozart in Germany in 1789 and 1790. The concert programs included symphonies by Mozart. While the specific symphonies are not designated in the programs, it is reasonable to assume that they would have included his most recent efforts; i.e., one or more of the final trilogy.

A further clue is found in the fact that Mozart’s autograph of the score for the G-minor Symphony contains modifications of the original version’s *Andante*, as well as a revised version of the entire work (performed in this concert), adding clarinets to the orchestration. Such modifications would not have been made without the existence of previous performances, and the promise of new ones.

### **“Plunges into the abyss of the soul”**

Of much greater importance, of course, is the music itself. As with any masterpiece of such depth and profundity, Mozart’s G-minor Symphony has inspired glowing, but quite varied, responses. Robert Schumann praised the work’s “impassive beauty,” while Hector Berlioz characterized the G-minor Symphony as a “model of delicacy and naïveté.” On the other hand, pianist and historian Charles Rosen found “passion, violence and grief.” Mozart biographer, Alfred Einstein, termed the work a “fatalistic piece of chamber music,” in which he encountered “plunges into the abyss of the soul, symbolized in modulations so bold to Mozart’s contemporaries they must have seemed to lose their way entirely, and so distant that only Mozart himself could find the path back from them into the light of day.”

The G-minor Symphony is in four movements. The first (*Molto allegro*) is highly dramatic, featuring a terse development section that anticipates the music of Beethoven in its dramatic manipulation of the briefest rhythmic motifs. The slow movement (*Andante*) provides some lyrical relief from the opening, but there are also episodes that reinforce the turmoil and foreboding found throughout much of the Symphony. The third-movement Minuet (*Menuetto: Allegretto*) is far more aggressive than the typical courtly dance, although the central *Trio* radiates elegance and repose. The finale (*Allegro assai*) is a stormy affair, propelling relentlessly to the Symphony’s curt final bars.

*The score calls for flute; oboes, clarinets, and bassoons in pairs; 2 horns; and strings.*

Duration: c. 35 minutes

## **Concerto in B minor for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 104**

Composed in 1895

Premiered on March 19, 1896 at Queen's Hall in London, England, with Leo Stern as soloist and the composer conducting the London Philharmonic Society

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born in Mühldorf, Bohemia (now Czech Republic); September 8, 1841

Died in Prague, Czech Republic; May 1, 1904.

**This work was first performed by the Charlotte Symphony on October 23, 1947 with Guy Hutchins conducting at the Armory Auditorium. The eleventh and most recent performance set was on February 10 & 11, 2006 with Christof Perick conducting at the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.**

### **Dvořák in New York**

From 1892-1895, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák served as Director of the National Conservatory of Music in America. Jeannette Meyer Thurber, the Conservatory's founder, hoped that the new institution, located in New York City, would foster the development of important American concert music. Dvořák's responsibilities at the National Conservatory involved teaching three composition classes and conducting semiweekly orchestral rehearsals.

During his stay in America, Dvořák was also active as a composer. His most famous work from this period is the Symphony No. 9, Opus 95 ("From the New World"). Other compositions from Dvořák's "American" period include a String Quartet, a String Quintet, a Sonatina for Violin and Piano, an Orchestral Suite, and the magnificent Cello Concerto.

### **The Cello Concerto**

Dvořák started composition of his Cello Concerto in New York City on November 8, 1894, completing the work on February 9, 1895. During the composition of the second-movement *Adagio*, Dvořák learned of the grave illness of his sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová. As a young man, Dvořák had been in love with Josefina. Even though she rejected his marriage proposal, the two remained dear friends. As will be noted in the musical analysis below, Dvořák included a quotation of one of Josefina's favorite songs in the Concerto's *Adagio*. Josefina died on May 27, 1895. Following that tragedy, Dvořák extensively revised the final movement's coda, including yet another reference to the song quoted in the *Adagio*. He completed the final score on June 11, 1895.

Since the Concerto's premiere in 1896, it has been recognized as one of the glories of the repertoire for cello and orchestra. After reviewing the score, one of Dvořák's friends—a man by the name of Johannes Brahms—exclaimed: "Why on earth didn't I know one could write a violoncello concerto like this? If I had only known, I would have written one long ago!"

### *Musical Analysis*

The Dvořák Cello Concerto is in three movements. The first (*Allegro*) opens with the traditional orchestral exposition of the principal thematic material. The soloist enters with his own presentation of the themes, beginning with an emphatic, and far more elaborate version, of the opening motif. After a development and recapitulation of the principal themes, the opening movement concludes with dazzling passagework for the soloist and a martial setting of the opening motif.

The slow second movement (*Adagio ma non troppo*) is in A—B—A form. The central “B” section opens with a savage outburst, followed by the soloist’s introduction of a beautiful melody, based upon Dvořák’s song, “Leave me alone,” Opus 82, No. 1 (1887-8), a favorite of his lamented sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová.

The principal theme of the Concerto’s *Finale (Allegro moderato)* is an energetic, rustic melody, first introduced in full by the soloist. The theme alternates with affecting lyrical interludes, one including an unforgettable soaring melody, introduced by the cellist, and later played by a solo violin. The tranquil coda features reminiscences of the opening movement’s principal theme, as well as Josefina’s beloved song, first quoted in the *Adagio*. Suddenly, a final crescendo leads to the brilliant, *Allegro vivo*, dash to the finish.

*The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, and strings.*

Duration: c. 40 minutes