

WOLFGANG MOZART Symphony No. 39 in E-flat, K. 543

From its very first moments—a regal fanfare that transitions into a breezy, extroverted romp—one could easily imagine that Wolfgang Mozart wrote his Symphony No. 39 during a time of great joy. This was not the case, however. The summer of 1788 was an extraordinarily dark time in Mozart’s life, rife with both personal and professional challenges. While he had enjoyed notable success in Vienna for several years, times were changing. The Viennese public was quickly losing interest in the talents of the young composer-pianist from Salzburg, which was confirmed when the first local performances of *Don Giovanni* in May 1788 failed to capture the city’s imagination.

The situation was exacerbated when the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II, declared war on Turkey in February of that year. Money was already tight, and the dwindling number of public performances put Mozart in more dire financial straits than usual. This led the composer to write a series of letters to his friend, the textile merchant Michael Puchberg, asking for money. Puchberg was happy to help—the two were members of the same Masonic lodge and mutual friends of Joseph Haydn—and he had trusted Mozart enough to lend him money several times in the past. However, Mozart’s summer 1788 letters to Puchberg strike a tone of desperation. An excerpt from one such letter reads as follows:

The letter was sent on June 27, 1788. Two days later, tragedy struck—Mozart’s six-month-old daughter, Theresia Constanzia, passed away. This was a devastating blow to the Mozart family. Only one of his four children had survived infancy thus far. Theresia had successfully lived past one and two months—when two of Mozart’s previous sons had passed away—giving both Mozart and his wife, Constanze, hope that Theresia would live to see childhood. Sadly, it was not to be.

These events occurred right after Mozart completed his Symphony No. 39, the manuscript of which is dated June 26. The work was written at a remarkable pace and was followed in quick succession by two more symphonies (Nos. 40 and 41) in July and

August. Unusually, little to nothing is known about the symphony's first performance. One of Mozart's letters to Puchberg mentions a summer concert series at a brand-new casino in Vienna—and even enclosed a set of tickets for his friend—but no newspapers from the time refer to such an event. The prospects were either wishful thinking on Mozart's part, or the concerts were canceled due to lack of public interest. Still, Mozart paid to have orchestra parts prepared in the city of Offenbach, a costly endeavor that suggests a performance of the work did take place at some point. Even then, details remain uncertain. Various sources report that some unidentified symphonies of Mozart's were heard at several concerts in the years before his death in 1791. One of those very well could have been the Symphony No. 39, but this is pure speculation.

All mystery aside, the symphony brims with delights. From the jovial opening to the stately dance in the third movement, this is Mozart at his most carefree and charming. However, hints of darkness occasionally lurk at its corners. Brief thunderstorms interrupt the idyllic proceedings of the second movement, and the symphony as a whole—which culminates in a breathless final movement—seems to end with a question mark; triumphant, yes, but missing an added sense of finality. There is little evidence to support if Mozart foresaw the familial tragedy to come as he completed the work, but if he did, perhaps this symphony was his way of laughing through the tears.

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