

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

(1756-1791)

Serenata Notturna in D Major, K. 239

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, as is seemingly universally known, was one of the world's most amazing prodigies. He was composing at the age of five and the following year performed as pianist before the royal court in Vienna. At age 13, he entered the employment of the Archbishop of Salzburg as concertmaster of the orchestra and court organist. The young Mozart and his father often quarreled with the Archbishop because of their frequent requests for leave to perform in other cities or to apply for situations more in keeping with the younger Mozart's abilities. The requests angered the Archbishop so much that he was finally dismissed in 1781 with the now-famous kick in the backside from the Archbishop's secretary.

Mozart left Salzburg happily, hoping to find his fortune in Vienna. No longer a child prodigy, he was still in demand as a performer and was very active as a composer. He wrote mostly in the prevailing style gallant (gallant style) with its emphasis on elegance, grace, and charm. Save for a few outstanding exceptions, his compositions were essentially designed to please the nobles and church officials who were the principal patrons of his music. As he matured and musical tastes changed, Mozart began composing works of great expressivity, drama, and significant emotional content. He lived during an era when composers traditionally produced large numbers of works, which he accomplished despite his tragically short life. His output included 41 symphonies, 27 piano concertos, and 5 violin concertos. Many of these orchestral masterpieces, along with most of his outstanding operas, church works, and chamber music, were created during the decade between the time he left the Archbishop's employment and his death in 1791.

During 1790, Mozart's health was poor, and his compositional output declined. In 1791, however, his productivity rose astonishingly, and exhaustion may have contributed to his premature death on December 5, 1791. Despite popular stories to the contrary, he died of natural causes, probably rheumatic fever, and was given a simple burial in accordance with the law (not a pauper's funeral).

Mozart's autograph of his "Serenade No. 6 in D Major 'Serenata Notturna'" indicates that it was completed in January of 1776. The term "Notturna" in the title refers to a work performed in the evening. Late-eighteenth-century compositions such as the Divertimento, Serenade, Cassation, and Notturmo, were multi-movement instrumental works that were used as entertainment at wedding receptions, family reunions, dinner parties, and other festive occasions. These works were, generally, performed as background music to the evening's events. The character of the serenade was pleasant in expression and lighter in style than other multi-movement works. The "Serenata notturna" is scored for a chamber orchestra of violins, violas, cellos, bass, and timpani from which is drawn a solo quartet of 2 violins, 1 viola and 1 bass.

Author John N. Burk wrote of Mozart's serenades, ". . . Mozart used simple means to please his casual listeners, capturing their attention with wit, attaining distinction with his sensitivity to balance and color, his lively and unflinching imagination . . . He neither wrote above the heads of his audience, nor did he demean his art."

OF NOTE:

Since Mozart did not assign opus numbers to his 600-plus compositions, scholars often found it difficult to place his works in chronological order. In 1862, the Austrian musician and naturalist Dr. Ludwig Köchel prepared his *Chronologisch-thematisches Verzeichnis* ("Chronological Thematic Catalog"), which listed all of Mozart's music in order of composition. Today, the title of each piece is followed by a "K." number from Köchel's catalog.