Reno Chamber Orchestra Program Notes
January 30/31, 2010
By Chris Morrison

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

b. January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria
d. December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria

No reminder is really needed of the unique stature of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the history of Western music. His vast catalog of compositions – over 600 of them, including some 15 operas, 17 masses, 50 symphonies, 20 piano concertos, 23 string quartets, and so on (the list can go on for quite some time) – epitomizes the German-Austrian Classical style. His music is recognized and loved all over the world for its melodic, harmonic, and textural richness and beauty. The son of a well-known violinist and pedagogue, Mozart was one of the greatest prodigies ever, playing his first public concert at age five and composing his first music at seven. Before reaching the age of ten he had already played recitals in front of the likes of Marie Antoinette and King George III of England. He traveled throughout Europe through his teens. After failing to find a secure post elsewhere, and having grown dissatisfied with his career in Salzburg, Mozart moved to Vienna, where he spent the last decade of his life. While he enjoyed some successes with his new operas and piano concertos, life there grew more and more precarious, leading to his early death at age thirty-five.

Symphony No. 31 in D major, K. 297 "Paris"

Composed: 1778
Duration: 18 minutes

Having turned his attention temporarily to operas, concertos and piano music, during the years 1775-1777 Mozart wrote no symphonies at all. But then he received a commission for a new symphony from Joseph Le Gros, a singer and composer who had recently taken over the directorship of the Concerts Spirituel, one of Paris's first and best-known performance series. Mozart was in Paris with his mother Anna Maria from March to September 1778, during a concert tour in which they were also seeking a post for the twenty-two year old composer. In his previous visit, in 1762, the six-year old prodigy had been feted like few musicians of his day. But Mozart found the Paris of the late 1770s – and most of its aristocracy, musicians and audiences – cynical, dishonest, and decidedly unpleasant. Despite this, he knew that success in Paris could lead to big things.

Mozart's visit took a disastrous turn in July when his mother suddenly died of an unknown illness. Mozart couldn't break the news of her death to his father Leopold, who was back in their hometown of Salzburg, directly, so he began with a long letter in which he described her illness in the midst of other details on their trip. The subsequent letters in which he actually wrote of her death are some of the most touching in their correspondence.

In the midst of all this, Mozart was preparing his new Symphony No. 31. Going out of his way to appeal to the Parisian audience, Mozart employed the largest orchestra he had yet called on for a symphony, including pairs of all the woodwinds (including clarinets, marking the first time he had used them in a symphony) as well as French horns, trumpets, timpani, and strings. He also chose to employ the old three movement French symphonic form, omitting the usual minuet movement.

Mozart had been warned that Parisian audiences expected every symphony to begin with what was called "le premier coup d'archet" ("the first stroke of the bow"), an energetic simultaneous downbow on all the stringed instruments. Just before arriving in Paris, Mozart and his mother had spent four months in Mannheim, where he had heard their "orchestra of generals" – one of the finest ensembles then in existence – and the famous "Mannheim Rocket." Mozart ingeniously combines these two trademark musical gestures in the opening of the "Paris" Symphony: the orchestra holds a loud chord for four long beats, followed by two chords, each lasting two beats. Then comes the "Mannheim Rocket," a set of ever-louder ascending notes that seems to fly up to the next chord. Less traditionally, Mozart makes reference to the "coup d'archet" throughout the first movement, giving it a primary structural role. The movement's second main theme is much lighter in tone, but it retreats for the central development section, largely devoted to the opening theme.

The main themes of the lovely second movement are both rather solemn and courtly, but there are also some light-hearted interludes as the music progresses. An alternate slow movement for this symphony exists – Mozart wrote it when the original second movement supposedly "had failed to please" – but is not often played (the Symphony receives a new Köchel catalog number, K. 300a, when it is played with this alternate movement).

Having fun with the expected loud opening of the Finale, Mozart has a joke on the Parisian audience with the beginning of the third movement – a quiet rushing figure in the violins quickly followed by a full orchestral outburst. The surprise was effective, as Mozart wrote to his father: "the audience, as I expected, said 'hush' at the soft beginning, and when they heard the forte, began at once to clap their hands." Bassoons and strings then announce the first of the movement's main themes. A second section takes the form of a contrapuntal fugato for the strings, which is also incorporated into the subsequent development section before the lively opening theme returns as a final gesture, in music that moves easily, according to Alfred Einstein, between "brilliant tumult and graceful seriousness."

Bohuslav Martinu

b. December 8, 1890, Policka, Czechoslovakia
d. August 28, 1959, Liestal, Switzerland

Bohuslav Martinu is, alongside Leos Janácek, one of the most distinguished Czech composers of the twentieth century. Martinu was born and raised at the top of a church tower, where his father rang the bells. He studied violin at the Prague Conservatory in his teens, but was more interested in composing and reading and was eventually expelled for "incorrigible negligence." For several

years he played in the Czech Philharmonic, later moving to Paris where in the late 1920s and 1930s his compositions started to attract attention. He was always a prolific composer – ultimately producing over 400 works – and in the musically diverse Paris of those years absorbed everything from jazz to Latin American music to Renaissance and Baroque counterpoint. World War II forced him to flee Europe for the United States, where he lived starting in 1941. While his transition to life in America was difficult, he gradually made a reputation for himself and his music, taught at Tanglewood and the Curtis Institute, and eventually became an American citizen while continuing to travel and teach all over Europe.

Sinfonietta La Jolla

Composed: 1950
Duration: 20 minutes

For years after Martinu and his family fled to the United States in 1941 to remove themselves from the Nazi occupation of France, he harbored a strong desire to return to his Czech homeland. The opportunity seemed to present itself with the end of World War II, but when the Communist regime took control of Czechoslovakia in 1948, Martinu decided reluctantly to remain in the United States, and took a position as Visiting Professor of Composition at Princeton. Always a prolific composer, and one of the most often commissioned composers in America at that time, Martinu maintained a steady stream of new music, including the Sinfonietta La Jolla of 1950. The Sinfonietta was commissioned by the Musical Arts Society of La Jolla, California, and its director Nikolai Sokoloff (they also commissioned, among other works, the Symphony No. 3 by French composer Jean Françaix and the "New York Profiles" by American composer Norman Dello Joio).

The Society requested something melodic and accessible, and Martinu responded with one of his most popular and easily approachable compositions. Martinu was apparently inspired by the example of Franz Joseph Haydn and what he called Haydn's ability to "place himself at the service of music." The Sinfonietta has some of the rhythmic drive of Martinu's earlier music in the neoclassical style, as well as the repeating ostinatos and pervasive syncopation so characteristic of all his music. Not unusually for Martinu's orchestral works, there is a very prominent role for the piano in the Sinfonietta, not quite but almost achieving soloist status.

Proceeding at a moderate pace, the first movement alternates lively, rhythmic music with more lyrical sections. By contrast, the slow movement is more inward and somewhat chromatic in its harmony. It begins with a spare, wandering sort of melody tapped out in single piano notes, and the strings repeat a quiet ostinato on the second and third beats; one commentator likened the effect to "a mom humming while rocking the cradle." The subsequent building of this music into a surprisingly forceful climax was described by that same writer as akin to how "happiness can well up in a parent's heart at the simple bliss of seeing a child off on a dreamy voyage." Returning to the ostinatos and playful rhythms of the opening, the third movement finale is fast-paced and charming.

Nicolò Paganini

b. October 27, 1782, Genoa
d. May 27, 1840, Nice

Perhaps the greatest violin virtuoso in the history of the instrument, Nicolò Paganini was also in his heyday Europe's most popular musician. His first studies were with his father, an amateur violinist and mandolinist (Paganini ultimately excelled on those instruments as well as the guitar and viola). But he soon outstripped his father's abilities and those of subsequent teachers, and by his teens Paganini had successfully performed throughout Italy. Much of the next decade was spent, by Paganini's own account, gambling and womanizing. But then he rededicated himself to music, performing and practicing his instrument intensively. By 1825 he felt ready to perform outside of Italy, and for the next decade Paganini's virtuosity amazed audiences throughout Europe, leading to the rumor that he had made a deal with the Devil to obtain his skills (his thin frame and pale skin lent credence to the story). By 1834 chronic ill health forced him to retire from performing. Paganini redefined the role of violin virtuoso for generations to come. His compositions, including six violin concertos and a famous set of 24 caprices for solo violin, explored the range of violin techniques to an unprecedented degree.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 6

Composed: 1817-18
Duration: 38 minutes

Along with his sheer musical abilities, Paganini was one of the great showmen of his day, with a considerable arsenal of tricks at his disposal. One of his favorites was to deliberately have a worn and frayed string on his instrument, which would of course suddenly break during a performance. Paganini would theatrically continue the performance on the remaining three strings, to the delight of his fans. Paganini was also legendarily secretive about his music, and never allowed his works to be published during his lifetime, increasing their mystique (and also accounting for the fact that so many of his works are now lost). He was long thought to have composed five violin concertos, three of which had been lost after his death. Those missing three subsequently came to light, along with another previously unknown one.

The Violin Concerto No.1, premiered in Naples in March 1819, has always been one of Paganini's most popular works. But it had fallen out of favor for a number of decades until the young Yehudi Menuhin took it up in the 1930s and helped to make it fashionable again. The Concerto was originally written in the key of E-flat major: the orchestra was to play in E-flat, but Paganini's part would have been in D major, and he simply would have retuned his instrument up a half step. This would not only have given his instrument a more brilliant tone, but would also have made the technical challenges seem even more substantial than they were (to non-musical audience members, that is; musicians would have recognized what was going on). Such retuning of the instrument is not unprecedented – Mozart, for instance, calls on the viola to tune up a half step, from D to E-flat in his Sinfonia concertante, K. 364. Due to changes in tuning and playing standards over the years, Paganini's work is now much more commonly heard in the more convenient key of D major.

A quite lengthy orchestral introduction to the first movement makes one wonder momentarily whether the soloist is ever going to be heard. But when the violin does finally enter, it takes over the proceedings immediately. Here and throughout the work, the Violin Concerto No.1 not only exploits almost the entire range of virtuoso techniques available to a violinist – pizzicati in both hands, fast-paced runs, harmonics, double stops in thirds, lengthy arpeggios, and more – but also gives the soloist an opportunity for singing lyricism. Some of the Concerto's musical language – particularly its dramatic flair and lyric interludes – also owes more than a debt to the operas of Gioacchino Rossini, which were all the rage throughout Europe during that time.

In another example of Paganini's seeming exploitation of his personal image, the story was spread that the main theme of the Concerto's second movement was written on a decrepit, one-string violin while Paganini was in prison, accused of a murder he didn't commit. Apparently the true story is that Paganini composed this music as a memorial for an actor, Demarini, whom Paganini had seen performing in a play dealing with an unjustly jailed man. In either case, the nickname "Prison Scene" is still often associated with this music. The final movement is an exciting, extended showpiece, so much so that it has often been performed on its own. Another legendary violinist, Fritz Kreisler, was famous for his own arrangement of this grand and lively music.