A Night in Vienna

An American Composer's Perspective on
Korngold, Strauss, Lehar, Schubert, von Suppé & Mozart

Tonight's Plano Symphony Orchestra concert features music from the magical city of Vienna. The cultural greatness of a city is measured not by the artists who are paid to pass through, but by the artists who live and work there. Vienna was the city of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert. In the 19th century, Viennese music continued to bloom with Brahms and Mahler, and, in the 20th century, Vienna again became the center of the musical world with the modernist achievements of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern.

I.

Our evening begins with four festive crowd pleasers, starting with Eric Korngold's overture to the 1935 Hollywood movie *Captain Blood.* The film is a pirate adventure starring the then-unknown actors Errol Flynn and Olivia de Haviland. The music is unabashedly bombastic, with plenty of brass fanfares and soaring melodies for the full orchestra. Korngold (1897–1957) studied in Vienna, and he was a professor of music at the Vienna State Academy. He wrote operas, concertos and symphonic works, but he is remembered for his film scores.

Next are three dances: two from the famous Strauss family and one from a younger contemporary. The nobility in the 18th century had danced the minuet, but with the French revolution, there came a sudden shortage of aristocrats -- and of minuets. For dances in three-quarter time, composers such as Schubert turned to the relaxed country ländler, which then developed into the waltz, danced by both rich and poor.

Enter Johann Strauss, Jr. (1825-1899). Strauss dedicated his output primarily to the dance hall, and he produced a wealth of waltzes and polkas, including "The Blue Danube," "Vienna Blood" and the opera *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat). His brother Josef Strauss was also a noted waltz composer, of whom Johann said, "I am more popular, but he is more gifted." Their father, Johann Strauss, Sr. (1804–1849) had begun the Viennese waltz craze, but Johann Jr. quickly eclipsed his father's fame as a composer and conductor.

First, we hear Joseph Strauss' rousing polka "Ohne Sorgen" (Without Worries). He wrote it upon his recovery from a long illness, and it features joyful kettledrum outbursts as well as triumphant shouts of "Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah!" from the members of the orchestra.

Johann Strauss Jr.'s celebrated "Trish-Trash" polka follows. The composer had just returned from a successful Russian tour, and Viennese gossip magazines complained that he had neglected his hometown audience. Strauss dismissed the grumblings as mere "trish-trash" and imitated the growls of his critics with snarls in the French horns. His polka was a huge success, and it is believed to be the inspiration for Offenbach's infamous "Can-Can" in his opera *Orpheus in the Underworld.*

The next generation of Viennese waltz composers included the Hungarian Franz Lehár (1870–1948), whom Dvořák had encouraged to be a composer. Lehár's claim to fame is the operetta *Die lustige Witwe* (The Merry Widow), from which we hear the famous "Merry Widow Waltz." The plot concerns a rich widow and the townspeople's schemes to find her a suitable new husband who would not take her (and her money) away to a new locale. Lehár remained in Vienna during the Nazi era. Hitler liked the grandiose idea of Wagner's music, but he actually preferred listening to Lehár, so he declared Lehár's Jewish wife to be an "honorary Aryan."

II.

Of the composers of the "first Viennese School" of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, the only one actually born in Vienna was Franz Schubert (1797-1828). He studied with Mozart's adversary Antonio Salieri, and he idolized Beethoven. Schubert carried a torch at Beethoven's funeral, and when Schubert himself died a year later, he was buried, at his request, next to Beethoven, where he remains today. On his deathbed, Beethoven had declared, "Surely, Schubert has the divine spark."

As Sir Francis Tovey observed, since Schubert only lived to be 31, all of his over 900 compositions are early works. While Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert wrote in all of the standard forms, each composer had one area of unique mastery: for Haydn, it was the string quartet; for Mozart, it was opera; for Beethoven, it was the symphony; for Schubert, it was the song. Even in his sonatas, chamber ensembles and symphonies, Schubert was first a composer of songs. With long, lilting melodies of regular phrase lengths in a comfortable range, Schubert's instrumental music always calls out for a voice and German words. It is ironic that Schubert's contemporary, the writer Johann Goethe, did not care for Schubert's settings of his poems; Goethe found them too complicated and said that they distracted from the text.

Instead of the usual four movements, Schubert's Symphony No. 8 in B-minor has only two, hence its nickname, "the Unfinished." The composer made sketches for a continuation but never went back. Fittingly for a Viennese symphony, both movements are in triple meter, with subtle shifts between groupings of 2+2+2 or 3+2.
The work opens with a pensive melody in the lower strings. Over it, there are mysterious violin shivers that, for any other composer, could constitute a viable main theme all by themselves. Schubert, however, relegates the shivers to background figuration and, over them, brings in a plaintive new song-like melody in the oboe and

clarinet. Sunshine breaks forth with a ravishing second theme in the cellos followed by a stern closing theme that intertwines with the cello melody. The development brings a dramatic Beethovenian conflict, as quiet moments of anxiety alternate with mighty, fist-shaking outbursts. To complete the sonata form, there is a recapitulation; then, the opening theme returns in a solemn and dramatic coda.

The second movement begins as a sweet pastorale but quickly turns to a second theme with powerful Beethoven-like motivic outbursts that gradually build in grandeur. After the return of the pastorale, a third, closing theme quietly emerges in the strings and clarinet, and the music again builds, this time with an explosion of inexorable intensity. Since Schubert lavished so much melodic development on the exposition of his themes, he skips a formal development section and simply restates his material in a recapitulation. As in the first movement, he brings back the opening theme at the end.

This symphony shows Schubert as a master in the noble tradition of Mozart and Beethoven. Even the cynical 20th-century American writer H.L. Mencken (who had famously said, "97% of everything is crap") held Schubert in special reverence. He said, "[Schubert] stands above all of them as a contriver of sheer beauty, as a maker of music in the purest sense…one of the great glories of the human race."

III.

Franz von Suppé (1819 1895) was a prolific Austrian composer of light theater music. The *Light Cavalry Overture* comes from von Suppé's operetta *Leichte Kavallerie* (Light Cavalry). It presents a medley of tunes from the show, including a juicy gypsy theme for the cellos. The music begins and ends with blazing brass fanfares and the famous, galloping "cavalry-to-the-rescue" march abetted by trumpets, snare drum and cymbals.

IV.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) was the greatest musical genius who ever lived. In his 35 years -- from his first, elegant minuet (K. 1), written at the age of five, to his final, uncompleted *Requiem* (K. 626) -- Mozart composed masterpieces in all the genres of his day. Aaron Copland spoke of "the despair factor" when any other composer considers the scope and perfection of Mozart's achievement. Albert Einstein wrote, "The music of Mozart is of such purity and beauty that one feels he simply found it — that it always existed as part of the inner beauty of the universe waiting to be revealed."

Mozart lived in the late Classical era of comic opera, with the witty *repartée* and lively dialectic of the Enlightenment. For him, quick contrast is the rule. After every opening musical statement, he immediately "one-ups" himself with a contrasting rejoinder. His finest works are in the field of opera, in which he reveals an unparalleled capacity for depicting human experience in music, especially in the three comedies of romantic intrigue: *The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte.* Since his music appeals

so powerfully and indulgently to the senses, it is said that "When the angels in Heaven play for God, they play Bach; but when they play for fun, just for themselves, they play Mozart."

In the fifth century, St. Augustine declared that, for him, music was a sin, because the sheer beauty of the sound of the monks' chant made his mind stray from the divine message of the text. Charles Rosen states in *The Classical Style* that, if music is, indeed, a sin, then Mozart is "the most sinful composer of all." He adds, "Mozart's music is "shockingly voluptuous…no composer used the seductive physical power of music with the intensity and the range of Mozart…What is most extraordinary about Mozart's style is the combination of physical delight --- a sensuous play of sonority, an indulgence of the most luscious harmonic sequences --- with a purity and economy of line and form that render the seduction all the more efficient."

After Mozart's operas, his piano concertos are the greatest delight of his output. He wrote them mainly for himself to play, which he did with gusto. The Piano Concerto No. 21 in C K.467 dates from 1786, when, at 29, Mozart was at his full musical maturity. Here, ever the theater composer, he creates a miniature comic opera, with an endearing cast racing around and trading sly asides. He employs a large orchestra, which includes winds by twos plus trumpets and timpani.

The rich and multifaceted *Allegro* begins with a bright, Figaro-like march which alternates with gentler, more lyrical and, sometimes, tragic material. There follows a rapturous "Casanova-by-candlelight" *Andante,* with throbbing muted strings. The woodwinds have prominent roles in the passionate scene, as triple and quadruple rhythms delicately caress each other. The *Rondo Allegro Vivace* explodes like an opera finale. The music is full of surprises, as each different character in the comedy tells his/her side of the story and the full cast responds. After romping in playful banter, all join in a joyful celebration.

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