LES DÉLICES

DEBRA NAGY, DIRECTOR

MOONLIT MOZART

Early Music Vancouver

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Notes on the Program

Growing up in the 1980s, the fanciful Mozart biopic *Amadeus* (1984) left a strong impression on me. Adapted from the 1979 play by Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus* starred Tom Hulce as a brilliantly manic young Mozart and F. Murray Abraham as his jealous, somewhat less-inspired older colleague Antonio Salieri. Among many memorable moments, an early scene in which Salieri surreptitiously witnesses Mozart and his young love Constanze engaged in rough, naughty play has always lingered in my memory. The couple's flirtatious banter and scatalogical jokes are interrupted only by the strains of Mozart's Gran Partita for 13 winds floating in from the next room–a performance begun without its maestro. As Mozart rushes off, Salieri is left to reconcile how such transcendent music could be manifested by the wildly immature man he just encountered. Later, getting the chance to review the score, Salieri exclaims:

> *"Extraordinary! On the page it looked nothing. The beginning simple, almost comic. Just a pulse - bassoons and basset horns - like a rusty squeezebox. Then suddenly - high above it - an oboe, a single note, hanging there unwavering, till a clarinet took over and sweetened it into a phrase of such delight! This was no composition by a performing monkey! This was a music I'd never heard. Filled with such longing, such unfulfillable longing, it had me trembling. It seemed to me that I was hearing a voice of God."*

I can completely relate to Salieri's reaction when hearing Mozart's Serenades for winds. Mozart's music is always magical and his orchestration is masterful…but to experience the clarity and strength of these pieces on Classical-era woodwinds is doubly powerful and extremely rare. In truth, *Moonlit Mozart* is a bucket-list program for me: it's not easy (or cheap!) to assemble a woodwind team of this quality. Often, only bigger-budget organizations will hire this many wind players so that they can perform symphonic repertoire.

Despite their rarity today, wind octets were a relatively common ensemble in central Europe in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Evolved from military or civic ensembles, six- or eight-member wind bands offered an effective – and colorful – means to present many genres of music in virtually any setting. Known as *Harmoniemusik,* these ensembles were more portable than a full orchestra and their vibrant sound could be enjoyed indoors or outside. Performing "lighter" genres like nocturnes and serenades, dance music, or even operatic or symphonic reductions, an ensemble of eight woodwinds

could cover most – if not all – bases. Soaring melodies were often split between first oboe and first clarinet, inner parts were covered by other winds and horns, bassoons would alternate between tenor solos and bustling bass lines, and a double bass often provided reinforcement on the low end.

On a summer's evening in 18th century Vienna, it was common to hear live music in public spaces performed by wind bands. In a letter to his father, Mozart himself wrote about a charming encounter with a Viennese wind band:

> *"At eleven o'clock at night I was treated to a serenade performed by two clarinets, two horns and two bassoons--and that of my own composition . . . These musicians asked that the street door might be opened and, placing themselves in the center of the courtyard, surprised me, just as I was about to undress, in the most pleasant fashion imaginable with the first chord in E-flat."*
> *--from a letter by Mozart to his father, November 3, 1781*

Mozart's own wind serenades – including the *Adagio* from the Serenade in Eb K375 and his "Nachtmusik" Serenade in C minor K388 that we'll hear tonight – were written between 1781-1784. They date from Mozart's early years in Vienna when he was working to establish himself as a freelance artist following his stifling appointment in Salzburg. Perhaps Mozart wrote these works in an attempt to curry favor with Emperor Joseph II, who had established his own Imperial-Royal wind band or *Harmoniemusik* in 1782? The quality of the musicianship in the Emperor's ensemble was unsurpassed as it included top wind players of the era from the Vienna Opera house.

It should come as no surprise then that wind players from the Opera pit often played an important role as arrangers for wind ensembles: they knew the original music intimately and had access to the scores. In fact, just one week after the premiere of his *Abduction from the Seraglio*, Mozart wrote to his father that he was pulling an all-nighter to arrange the opera for wind band–before someone else did:

> *"I am up to my eyes in work, for by Sunday week I have to arrange my opera for wind instruments. If I don't, someone will anticipate me and secure the profits…You have no idea how difficult it is to arrange a work of this kind of wind instruments, so that it suits these instruments and yet loses none of its effect." – July 20, 1782*

The Magic Flute, K.620 was premiered on September 30, 1791 in Vienna, just two months before Mozart's death. Given his failing health, Mozart could hardly be expected to rush a wind-band arrangement to press, but the prolific arranger Joseph Heidenreich issued an advertisement in the *Wiener Zeitung* on January 14, 1792 offering his new arrangement of "the last work of the great Mozart" with an "early-bird" discount to subscribers who ordered before mid-February. You'll hear how Heidenreich captures the effervescence of Mozart's famous overture; I've chosen several other movements from Heidenreich's arrangement that sparkle with the lightness and pervasive magic of the opera's plot.

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Besides being fun to listen to, the 18th Century arrangements of *The Magic Flute* and *Don Giovanni* (by Viennese oboist Josef Triebensee) that we feature on this program sensitively solve various technical issues for instruments that don't play easily in all keys or that cannot modulate (valveless horns, for example, must physically change crooks to play in different keys). Josef Triebensee was a sensitive arranger for winds owing to not only his but also his father's experience. His father Georg likely played oboe in the premieres of Mozart's serenades as a member of the Imperial *Harmoniemusik*, while Josef took up principal oboe roles in Vienna's leading theaters from the early 1790s. Josef's arrangement of *Don Giovanni* incorporated Mozart's own additions to the opera for its first Vienna performances, indicating that his arrangement was not completed until after 1788. In Triebensee's version, the wind band effectively conveys the famously mysterious opening of the overture as well as the light comedic fantasies of the frustrated servant Leporello in "Notte e giorno faticar." Don Giovanni's famous duet of seduction with Zerlina "Là ci darem la mano" is portrayed in a dialogue between oboe and bassoon.

I've also taken the liberty to create my own arrangements of selections from *Marriage of Figaro*, K.492, inspired by those of Johann Nepomuk Wendt (c.1745-1809), an oboist in the Vienna opera orchestra. The lightness and humor of arias like *Cinque…dieci* and *Non più andrai* are delightfully reflected in a setting for woodwinds. By contrast, the emotional depth and vulnerability of Countess Almaviva's famous aria from Act III *Dove sono i bei momenti* offers beautiful opportunities for oboe and bassoon solos.

Finally, we come to Mozart's remarkable Serenade in C minor, KV388. Dubbed "Nachtmusik," the serenade's minor key is very unusual and dark. Social, functional music was usually in a major key, but Mozart's choice of c minor immediately imbues seriousness and high-drama. Furthermore, Mozart's four movement scheme – while traditional for elevated genres like symphonies and string quartets – is unusual for wind music. The first movement is full of *sturm und drang* and emotional churning; the contrasting second movement *Andante* recalls the most intimate of exchanges in Mozart's operas. Even the use of "learned" techniques like the canons and inverted counterpoint of the *Menuetto (in canone) and Trio* make this serenade stand out. The final *Allegro* is a theme and variations that displays the full brilliance of Mozart's orchestration as a single tune is continually transformed and transmuted through the kaleidoscope of the *Harmonie*. Perhaps the ambitious scope, serious nature, and significant challenges of KV388 compelled Mozart to later distill the serenade into a Quintet for strings, KV406.

– Debra Nagy