Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756 –1791)
Sinfonia concertante, K.364

He’s been the subject of an Academy Award-winning movie. His music has been marketed as a tool for improving test scores and making babies smarter. More than two centuries after his death, he still draws tourists by the tens of thousands to his birthplace in Austria.

If Mozart seems always ripe for exploitation today, his early life wasn’t much different. From the time he was seven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was endlessly paraded by his father from one European city to another. In little more than three years, Mozart and his family travelled to ten German cities, as well as Brussels, London, and Paris—where they dined with Louis XV at Versailles.

Following a year in England, they made their way home, but not before making stops in Moravia and Vienna, where Mozart and his sister contracted smallpox. By the time they finally settled down, Mozart was only 13 years old.
Hardly a normal life for anyone, let alone a small child. But Mozart was no ordinary child.

He was only three when his older sister, Nannerl, began keyboard lessons. His sister later described Mozart’s response:

“He often spent much time at the clavier…and his pleasure showed that it sounded good…In the fourth year of his age his father…began to teach him a few minuets and pieces at the clavier…He could play it faultlessly and with the greatest delicacy, and keeping exactly in time…. At the age of five, he was already composing little pieces, which he played to his father who wrote them down.”

He gave his first public performance at the age of five. Two years later, as the story goes, he picked up a violin and sight-read a composition with note-perfect accuracy—even though he had never had a single violin lesson.

Mozart’s extraordinary gifts as a child prodigy did more than just add to the family’s coffers; his fame brought him into contact with many of the leading composers of the day, and afforded numerous opportunities to learn from them.

And he learned well. By the time he finally broke free of his aristocratic (and autocratic) patron in Salzburg to embark on a career as an independent composer in Vienna, Mozart well on his way to becoming a supreme master of virtually every musical form. His symphonies are part of the core orchestral repertoire; his instrumental and chamber works are highlights of any recital season; and his operas are cornerstones of opera houses throughout the world.
But among all of Mozart’s more than 600 works, there is only one surviving complete example of the form known as sinfonia concertante. This type of piece, which—as the name implies—combines elements of both symphony and concerto, was especially popular in Paris around the end of the 18th century.

The work performed today, Mozart’s *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin and viola in E-flat major, is a major masterpiece. One critic has called it Mozart’s “crowning achievement in the field of the violin concerto,” surpassing the five concertos for violin and orchestra.

One of the most striking qualities of the work, wrote celebrated pianist and author Charles Rosen, is its unique sonority. “The very first chord…gives the characteristic sound, which is like the sonority of the viola translated into the language of the full orchestra. This first chord alone is a milestone in Mozart’s career; for the first time he had created a sonority at once completely individual and logically related to the nature of the work.”

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
*(1840 – 1893)*  
*Symphony No. 4, Opus 36*

Tchaikovsky is one of those rare composers whose music is able to cut across cultural lines, and is so enduring that generations of snobbish critics have been unable to diminish it. Much of this must be due to Tchaikovsky’s incredible melodic gift. It is almost impossible to name a work of his that doesn’t overflow with memorable tunes, or that fails to connect with listeners on the very first hearing.

The immediate appeal and directness of Tchaikovsky’s music masks a life that was anything but simple and straightforward. Like many musical giants, Tchaikovsky displayed his talent at an early age, beginning piano lessons at the age of four. But, by the time he was ten, he also showed early signs of a sensitive and troubled disposition, compounded by the devastating loss of his mother four years later.

As a young student, Tchaikovsky trained not for a life in music, but for a career in law. In 1859, he was given a position at the Ministry of Justice in Saint Petersburg. Finally, in 1862, he enrolled in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, where he would study composition with the renowned Anton Rubinstein.

By 1877, with two symphonies and *Swan Lake* to his credit, Tchaikovsky became an established composer and a respected professor of music. At the same time, his personal life was falling apart. Despite his homosexuality, Tchaikovsky had proposed to Antonina Miliukova, an infatuated student.

The marriage was a disaster, leading the composer to contemplate suicide by plunging into the Moscow River. But by the end of the year, he began to recover, aided by his
growing bond with Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy widow. Although the two never met face-to-face, she became Tchaikovsky’s patron, providing the financial support that enabled him to leave his teaching duties and devote himself to composing full-time. While it would be easy to attribute the conflict and passions of the Fourth Symphony to the turmoil in Tchaikovsky’s life at this time, the fact is he has already finished the symphony by the time he proposed to Antonina. “My Symphony is definitely the best work I have written so far,” Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother, Modest, “but it needed some hard work to compose it; especially the first part.”

In writing to Mme. von Meck, Tchaikovsky provided a guide of sorts to the work’s inspiration and development: “The introduction is the ‘seed’ of the whole Symphony: This is fate: that fateful force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal, which jealously ensures that peace and happiness shall not be complete and unclouded.”

The second movement, he continued, presented “a whole procession of memories… it is at once sad and somehow sweet to lose ourselves in the past.”

The third movement, Tchaikovsky said, contained no “definite feelings” but rather “capricious arabesques” and “elusive images.”

“I never compose in the abstract, i.e. a musical idea never appears without its appropriate external form…When I was writing the Scherzo of our Symphony, I imagined it exactly as you heard it. It is unthinkable played any other way than pizzicato.”

In the Finale, Tchaikovsky paints a vivid impression of a boisterous Russian folk celebration, and quotes an actual Russian folksong (*In the meadow stood a birch tree*). The message of this movement, he says, is that if you have no joy within you, you must look for it in others: “Go among the people. See how they can enjoy themselves, surrendering themselves wholeheartedly to joyful feelings.”

Not that this joyfulness is without a dark cloud: “Hardly have you managed to forget yourself and to be carried away by the spectacle of the joys of others than irrepressible ‘fate’ again appears and reminds you of yourself.” But this moment of doubt is swept away by the time the exciting last chords come crashing down.

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