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## W.A. Mozart (1756-1791) Serenade in B-flat K.361 'Gran Partita' (1781-82)

*Largo. Allegro molto*

*Menuetto - Trio I - Trio II*

*Adagio*

*Menuetto. Allegretto - Trio I - Trio II*

*Romanze. Adagio - Allegretto - Adagio*

*Thema con Variazioni*

*Rondo. Allegro molto*

The Gran Partita was written during the boom years of 'Harmoniemusik' – music written for a court (or, less sophisticatedly, a military or street) wind band, generally as background music to dining or other socialising. An operatic example of Harmoniemusik comes during dinner in *Don Giovanni* when a Harmonie plays an arrangement of an aria from *Figaro*. Such aristocratic bands arose in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, and declined in the austerity years of the Napoleonic wars. The Harmonie's instruments came in pairs: at the core a pair of horns, underpinned by bassoons and overlaid by some combination of flutes, oboes, clarinets, basset horns, and cors anglais. There were usually 6 or 8 of these paired players along with an optional deep bass provided by a trombone, double bassoon, shawm or string bass.

Mozart wrote two early (1773) Divertimenti for a 10-piece Harmonie in Milan followed by five more in Salzburg for the more usual sextet (two each of oboe, bassoon, horn) - all light and witty, undemanding of the listener. The Gran Partita, however, is the first (and arguably the greatest) of the three much more substantial Harmonie Serenades written in 1781-2. One of them, K.375, Mozart discloses, was initially written to be played in the house of friend, but with an admittedly pecuniary motive: *'the chief reason why I composed it was in order to let Herr von Strack, [Chamberlain to the Emperor] who goes there every day, hear something of my composition; so I wrote it rather carefully.'*

Mozart possibly started writing the Gran Partita when he was in Munich producing *Idomeneo* for Prince-Elector Karl Theodor's court opera which had recently moved there from Mannheim. Mozart was very impressed with the playing of its oboist Friedrich Ramm. He had presented Ramm with his oboe concerto in Mannheim, and wrote the oboe quartet for him in Munich. The Gran Partita is also closely associated with the Viennese clarinetist Anton Stadler, whose playing was later to inspire the Clarinet Quintet and the Clarinet Concerto. Stadler gave the first performance of the Serenade in 1784 in Vienna as part of his own benefit concert; it was billed as *'a great wind piece of a very special kind composed by Herr Mozart'*.

Though frequently described as for 13-wind instruments: 2 each of oboes, clarinets in Bb, Bassett horns, bassoons, french horns in F, french horns in Bb and a single contra-bassoon, the original scoring was actually for double-bass rather than contra-bassoon – there are pizzicato markings in the manuscript. The number and diversity of instruments allows Mozart to explore new combinations - an orchestral breadth of colour supporting the operatic personalities of individual instruments.

The opening *Largo* calls us to attention and acts as a taster for the varied blocks of sound and melodic lines that are to come. The following *Allegro molto*'s abrupt motif (illustrated) is taken



from the third scene of the opera *Le Maréchal Ferrant* (The Farrier) by François-André Danican Philidor<sup>1</sup>, which Mozart may well have heard in Paris.

The following *Minuet* has two contrasting *Trio* sections; the first just uses the two clarinets and the two basset horns, the second gives the clarinets a breather and pairs off the oboes with the basset horns accompanied by the lower instruments, particularly exercising the first bassoon in running triplets.

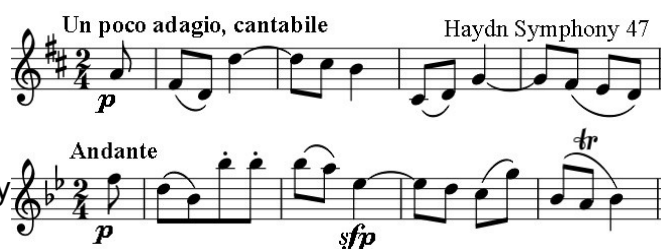
The *Adagio* is, thanks to Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus* and its film, the best-known of the seven movements. Following Pushkin's short verse play *Mozart and Salieri* of 1830, Shaffer's Salieri recognises Mozart's genius and, by contrast, his own mediocrity. For Shaffer, Salieri's revelatory moment comes when the first oboe's entry on a high Bb transforms a mere 'squeeze-box' accompaniment into 'the voice of God'.



Another *Minuet* with two *Trios* follows. Again Mozart explores new combinations of instruments, for example, the second *Trio*'s theme is played by the first oboe and basset horn in unison with the first bassoon an octave lower. The better the players, the better the blend and the harder it is to hear exactly which instruments are playing.

The *Romanza's Adagio* starts, like the opening of the Clarinet Quintet, with one of Mozart's miracles of simplicity: two horns in octaves providing the bass along with just two clarinets for a bar joined by two oboes and then two bassoons. But the resultant sound is one you will never forget. The *Adagio*'s luxuriance contrasts with a sprightly *Allegretto* where the bassoons and double-bass keep fit with semiquaver exercises.

Now follows a set of variations, which are a re-scoring of those in Mozart's Flute Quartet K.171. Whether Mozart's or another hand made the arrangement is debated, but the earlier movement is in turn derived from the second movement of Haydn's Symphony No 47 (known as *The Palindrome* because of its mirror-image Minuet). Mozart's theme is very similar to Haydn's (both illustrated) and the variations have a similar shape. The theme for the last movement, a rollicking *Rondo*, is also recycled from one of Mozart's very early works, the keyboard Sonata for four hands K.19d written when he was nine.



The *Gran Partita* still endears itself to audiences as it did at its 1784 premier to the critic Adolphe Schink: 'I heard music for wind instruments today, by Herr Mozart - glorious and sublime! ... at each instrument sat a master - oh, what an effect it made - glorious and grand, excellent and sublime!'

<sup>1</sup> Philidor was from an oboe-playing family (his great-uncle co-invented the instrument), but is now remembered more for his prowess at chess than for his 20 comic operas. He was considered the best player in the world for 50 years, wrote a standard treatise on chess and played against Voltaire, Jean Jacques Rousseau and David Hume.