

KISHWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey Decker

Overture to “The Marriage of Figaro,” by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed his four-act opera buffa (comic opera), *Le nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro), in Vienna in 1786. Working with a libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte based on a 1784 comedy by Pierre Beaumarchais, *La fole journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* (The Mad Day, or The Marriage of Figaro), Mozart created what is now one of the most popular and arguably perhaps one of the greatest of all operas.

With Mozart conducting from the keyboard, the opera premiered at the Burgtheater in Vienna on May 1, 1786, and the story about the marriage of servants Figaro and Susanna, one that happens in spite of their employer, Count Almaviva’s, attempts at seducing Susanna. In the end, the philanderer Almaviva is taught a valuable lesson and he reunites with his countess.

In 2017, *The Marriage of Figaro* was voted No. 1 out of the 20 operas featured in a magazine survey completed by 172 opera singers. The magazine concluded that the opera is “one of the supreme masterpieces of operatic comedy, whose rich sense of humanity shines out of Mozart’s miraculous score.”

Even though the story about two servants besting their aristocratic employer was considered too controversial in heavily censored imperial Vienna, Mozart’s librettist managed to get Emperor Joseph II’s approval for an operatic version and thus was born the first of Mozart’s and Da Ponte’s three great successes together. The other two operas were *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* (So Do They All) in 1787 and 1790, respectively.

With the opera music scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, we sadly only hear the overture tonight. But the overture is itself very popular and a longstanding and beloved part of the orchestral repertoire. It is truly an exciting and beautiful way to open either an opera or a 45th anniversary orchestra concert.

Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major, K. 219, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Before he left Salzburg with Prince-Archbishop Colloredo’s permission for what was supposed to be a temporary sojourn to Vienna in 1781, Mozart completed most of his concertos for string instruments. Five of these works were his violin concertos. It remains a mystery as for whom or for what occasion he composed them. It is also a bit mysterious to know that handwriting, paper, and watermark analyses reveal that all five of the violin concertos were re-dated several times by Mozart himself.

First dated 1775, his Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major, K. 219, with the nickname “Turkish”, was later changed to 1780 and then finally back to 1775. We do know that it was premiered during the Christmas season in Salzburg in 1775.

In the typical three movements, the first, marked *aperto* (opening) rather than the typical *allegro* (fast), opens with a broader “opening” in the form of a perhaps more majestic Mozartian tune. Unusually, the soloist enters with a short but sweet *adagio* (slow) passage that stops the forward momentum of the movement. Suddenly, when the soloist ends the passage, the movement takes off in a flash and goes back into the opening main theme with the soloist playing a different melody high above the orchestral accompaniment. One might say this little interlude is a Mozart “Hollywood” moment.

The central *Adagio* movement is certainly one of Mozart’s most sublime concerto movements. It is surprising to consider that the 19-year-old composer could think in such memorable and deeply emotional terms. One wonders why Mozart found it necessary to compose an alternative middle movement for this concerto in the form of the “Adagio for Violin and Orchestra in E major, K. 261.”

The third movement is a rondo in the tempo of a minuet in 3/4 time. The part of the piece that gives it the title “Turkish” comes in the middle of the movement where the time changes from 3/4 to 2/4 time and it takes on a “Turkish” characteristic with some slightly obnoxious elements such as unison chromatic crescendos, a repetition of short musical elements like those used in oriental music, and a sort of rapping of their bows on their instruments by the cellos and basses. Other examples of what might be described as having Turkish elements are Mozart’s own “Rondo alla Turca” third movement from his “Piano Sonata No. 11 in A major, K. 331,” and Beethoven’s “Turkish March” from his incidental music for “Die Ruinen von Athen” (The Ruins of Athens).

Tonight’s “Mozart Violin Concerto No. 5” usually lasts about 28 minutes. This is surprising when we realize that Jascha Heifetz’s famous 1957 recording of the “Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto” is only a minute and a half longer!

Symphony No. 1 in D major, “Titan,” by Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Composed between 1884 and 1888, Gustav Mahler’s “Symphony No. 1 in D major” failed dramatically at its first performance in Budapest on November 20, 1889. Today it seems the concert-going public cannot get enough of it. That first audience considered it too new with many elements pushing the envelope of tradition, especially because of its size and orchestration ... and certainly its volume! Even more surprising is that, in our Internet-encased short-attention-span world, a symphony that clocks in at around 50 minutes continues to sell out concert halls and sell myriad recordings by orchestras and conductors around the world!

Mahler originally conceived the work as a giant symphonic poem in two parts with five movements, several played without pauses between. For the work’s more successful Hamburg premier a few years later, Mahler added a program, or story, loosely based on Jean Paul’s novel,

Titan. Although Mahler eventually dropped the program and revised the work, removing one of the five movements, the subtitle “Titan” stuck.

Scored for an orchestra of about 100 musicians, not all of the brass and woodwinds play until the final movement. In the original version, Mahler asked extra horns to reinforce the seven horns in the final 76 measures of the final movement. He later removed this request, adding parts for a fifth trumpet and fourth trombone instead. He also asks the seven horns to stand at the symphony’s end in order to obtain the sound and projection he envisioned. Additionally, you will see that there are some very interesting things happening during the louder moments. For one, in the boisterous second movement, Mahler asks the woodwinds and horns to raise the bells of their instruments into the air. The horns frequently play *gestopft* (stopped) notes by stuffing their right hand deep into the bell. The sound effect is extraordinarily different than the horn’s usual mellow sound.

The version most often played now is in four movements. The first begins very quietly with violins in the stratosphere but, as more instruments enter, quickly becomes very pastoral with chirping birds and distant trumpet and horn calls. Very tuneful and memorable with Mahler incorporating his own song, “Ging heut’ morgen übers Feld” (Went across the field this morning), one of a cycle titled “Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen” (Songs of a wayfarer). The movement grows more exciting and loud and ends with a flourish one might associate with the end of an entire symphony. The second movement, in a quick three-beats-per-measure, sends us into a jolly jaunty dance rhythm. Sandwiched between this beginning and ending music is a genteel version of the Austrian folk dance, the *Ländler*, a precursor to the waltz.

Mahler breaks all tradition using a solo double bass to open the third movement with a minor-key, darker version of the popular song “Frère Jacques.” And it’s played at the tempo, or speed, of a funeral dirge. With more solo instruments joining in the tune, we soon have what is known as a canon, where one or more voices sing the same tune but begin and end at different points like we sometimes sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” Mahler later incorporates another of his “Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen,” the haunting and somewhat maniacal “Die zwei blauen Augen” (The two blue eyes). He soon has us singing and dancing to a trumpet and oboe duet sounding like a klezmer band!

The fourth and final movement begins with a flash of lightning quickly after the third, and immediately takes off into a gigantic movement of frantic nervousness eventually ending in splashes of sound and fanfares. This movement alone is longer and larger than the previous three combined! A serious workout for the orchestra, we again hear one of his “Songs of a Wayfarer” and other material from earlier movements. As things grow in size and louder dynamics with a giant percussion section, louder and stronger brass, and the return of fanfares that ended the first movement, listeners and players alike know that this long and strange journey is nearly over, and the triumph and sense of accomplishment feels very satisfying and certainly overwhelming. It is a perfect work to celebrate the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra’s 45th Anniversary.