Small Stage Symphonies 3: Gran Partita/The Soldier’s Tale
Notes by Dr. David Cole

Mozart: Serenade No. 10 in B-flat major, K. 361, “Gran Partita”

The word *serenade* evokes visions of an ardent young swain crooning beneath a rose-trestled balcony to the object of his affection listening attentively above. The warbling lover might accompany himself on lute or guitar under a shining moon on a warm summer night, with or without a backup instrumental group. From the eighteenth century onwards, the word “serenade” came to be associated with purely instrumental music, though the serenade with voice remained a cultural reference for many composers. In the twentieth century, composers as diverse as Arnold Schoenberg and Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote works with the title “serenade” that are akin to its more conventional meaning.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, *serenade* denoted a multi-movement work for an instrumental ensemble. These works were light entertainment music – something to be played as dinner music, or for some special occasion such as a wedding or the birthday of a patron. They sometimes bore the title *divertimento*, promising music that would pleasantly divert and entertain. Divertimenti and serenades had at least three movements in the manner of a concerto or symphony, but often had as many as nine or ten. The ensemble could be small, such as a string trio or quartet (Mozart’s famous *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, K. 525, is a serenade for string quintet), but a serenade/divertimento could also be written for a full orchestra or a woodwind group.

Often the instrumentation of a serenade suggests a possible venue for the occasion. In general, serenades employing strings would be performed indoors in the more intimate parlors and drawing rooms of the time. Outdoor serenades were more likely to be scored for larger wind groups, since their louder and more penetrating tone would carry farther in the formal gardens and well-groomed lawns of 18th-century palaces.

More than 30 of Mozart’s serenades and divertimenti have survived to our time. For music that was intended to be heard once and then forgotten, it is notable that these works were copied and preserved. While some of them are of the “throwaway” variety, a number of these works transcend the bounds of light entertainment music and are notable for their beauty and profundity. We know that some of this is the result of the friendship that Mozart developed with particular patrons and their families. The “Haffner” serenade, K. 250, is written for a symphony orchestra and lasts about 40 minutes – longer than any Mozart symphony. Written for the wedding of Marie Elisabeth Haffner, it is a work that is both entertaining and profound. In all likelihood, Mozart wished to present his best work to honor his friend Sigmund Haffner and his family.

Among Mozart’s serenades, the three works for *Harmoniemusik* (wind band) come from his early years in Vienna (1781 – 1784). While it is tempting to ascribe them to the Viennese fad for wind band music that began in the 1780s, at least two of the three works predate the establishment of the *Imperial Royal Harmonie* by Emperor Joseph II. The Emperor’s wind ensemble consisted of pairs of oboes, clarinets,
bassoons and horns and served as the template for other Viennese wind groups. Mozart’s briefer works in this genre (the Serenades in E-flat and C minor) conform to this instrumentation. The *Gran Partita*, however, is scored for the luxurious combination of two oboes, two clarinets, two basset horns, two bassoons, and four horns, with the addition of either a contrabassoon or double bass. It is the longest of Mozart’s works for winds and longer than any of his symphonies; the music is more symphonic than it is diverting, with a richness of texture and profundity of expression found in Mozart’s symphonies, concertos and operas.

The origins of the *Gran Partita* are shrouded in mystery. It dates from either 1780 or 1781, and the grand occasion for which Mozart wrote it is unknown; it is quite possible that the event was canceled. The title, too, is enigmatic – it is unlikely that Mozart gave it that name, and it is written on the manuscript in a hand that is not the composer’s. The idea that he wrote it as a wedding present for his wife Constanze has been safely debunked and we know that it substantially predates the only public performance in Mozart’s lifetime, a benefit concert for clarinetist Anton Stadler. Only four movements of the work were performed on that occasion, so it is unlikely that concert was the première performance. It may be possible that Mozart had written it as a musical “resumé,” much like J.S. Bach’s B minor Mass – a work he could send to prospective employers to demonstrate his abilities in writing for a wind group.

The work is in seven movements. The stately *Largo* opens with majestic fanfares from the full ensemble, answered by the clarinet and the oboe. It ushers in an *Allegro molto* that employs very concise amounts of musical material, beginning with an insouciant four-note figure. Both minuets (movements 2 and 4) are five-part minuets with two trios; contrast is provided by one trio being in a minor key in each movement. The *Adagio* could be an instrumental version of one of Mozart’s opera ensembles, with oboe, clarinet and basset horn singing their heartfelt melismas over a serene accompaniment. The fifth movement *Romanze* is a companion to the third movement *Adagio*, but the serenity is here interrupted by a central C minor section (*Allegro*) where the clarinets and then the entire ensemble over a nervous staccato accompaniment in the bassoons. The Theme and Variations is an adaptation of music Mozart wrote for his Flute Quartet in C major, K. 285b. It presents a theme in the solo clarinet which is perky and lyrical by turns, which is answered by the entire ensemble. The theme develops through six variations, *with the fifth an Adagio and the final variation an Allegretto*. The final Rondo is the one movement of the work that can truly said to be in “serenade style.” It bubbles along in irrepressible high spirits, with many witty interchanges between all the instruments. Mozart teases us on how he’ll conclude the work; brief cadential fanfares suddenly dissipate into slithery chromatic lines. Mozart finishes his little joke, and a final rapid buildup in the woodwinds leads to fanfares that end the work in joyous celebration.

**Igor Stravinsky: The Soldier’s Tale**

After the carnage and devastation of the First World War, the performing arts in Europe were as crippled as the wounded soldiers who returned from the battlefields of France, Germany and Russia.
The patronage system that had sustained the arts for centuries was devastated by war and subsequent economic collapse. Many of the singers and musicians of the great orchestras and opera companies had been mobilized as soldiers; many of them never returned. In the war’s aftermath, the grand and expensive spectacles of opera and ballet had to be presented under much-reduced circumstances until the national economies of the continent had recovered.

Before the war, impresario Sergei Diaghilev’s Paris-based Les Ballets Russes was the premier ballet company in Europe. In 1908, Diaghilev hired a young and largely unknown composer, Igor Stravinsky, to complete a commission left unfinished by Anatoly Lyadov. Diaghilev was so impressed by Stravinsky’s music that he took the young composer under his wing and soon had him writing full-time for Les Ballets Russes. A string of ballet “greatest hits” followed: The Firebird (1910), Petrushka (1911) and the scandalous Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring), whose music so incited patrons at its première that fistfights broke out. Stravinsky was propelled into the forefront of the musical avant-garde, and his works were full of the musical techniques of the new century: polyrhythm, polytonality, octatonic scales, grinding dissonances and barbaric rhythmic ostinatos. It appeared that Stravinsky was at the pinnacle of his success and was destined for a spectacular future.

The war and the Russian Revolution changed Stravinsky’s life forever. He spent most of the war in neutral Switzerland, living largely a hand-to-mouth existence. At the war’s conclusion, he was unwilling to return to his homeland to live under the rule of the Bolsheviks. He was cut off both from his family and from his sources of income; the Soviets had seized all the profits from his works published in Russia as well as his family’s estate. He would only finally return to his former homeland in October of 1962.

Finding little funding or interest in his large-scale works in postwar Europe, Stravinsky modified his instrumental palate in order to make his living as a composer. A budding friendship with the novelist and poet C.F. Ramuz led to the creation of a unique piece of theatre: L’Histoire du Soldat (The Soldier’s Tale), first heard in Lausanne in 1918. Instead of writing for an enormous orchestra, Stravinsky scored L’Histoire for a chamber ensemble: two string instruments (violin and bass), two woodwinds (clarinet and bassoon), two brass (trumpet and trombone) and one percussionist (playing seven different instruments). In a full production, the drama is presented by three actors: the Narrator, the Soldier, and the Devil, and they are joined by a Princess in a dancing but non-speaking role. The work is dedicated to Werner Reinhart, the Swiss philanthropist who helped fund the earliest performances of the work and who translated the text into German.

L’Histoire du Soldat is a morality tale: a simple Soldier returning home on leave encounters the Devil, who persuades him to trade his fiddle (a metaphor for his soul) for a magic book which is the source of endless wealth. The unsuspecting Soldier agrees and consents to accompany the Devil to his palatial home for three days to teach the Devil how to play the violin. When the Soldier finally returns to his village he discovers that three years have passed, not three days. He unsheathes his sword to confront the Devil, but the Devil reminds him of the deal he’s struck and the unbelievable financial advantages of the book for which he’s traded. The Soldier delves into the book and accumulates an enormous fortune but finds that despite all his wealth, he has lost both his soul and his happiness. The Devil (disguised as
an old woman) enters and taunts him with the loss of his fiddle. When the Devil hands it to him to play, the Soldier finds that the instrument will no longer produce a single note for him; he hurls the fiddle away and destroys the magic book in anger and frustration.

In Part II, the Soldier abandons his homeland and his life as a millionaire in order to regain his soul and happiness. In a nearby kingdom, he poses as an army doctor to win the hand of a Princess who is lying ill and near to death. The Soldier is convinced his luck is turning for the better, but the Devil appears and reminds him that neither his source of wealth (the book) nor his soul (the fiddle) is in his possession any longer. At this point, the Narrator breaks the barrier between himself and the other characters in order to help the Soldier. He tells the Soldier to challenge the Devil to a card game and let him win; without the Devil’s money, the Soldier will be free to reclaim his fiddle. The Soldier plays and wins just as the Narrator suggested; the Devil falls. The Soldier then cures and wins the Princess by playing his fiddle in a series of three dances (Tango, Waltz, Ragtime). The Devil regains consciousness, but the Soldier plays again and the Devil is forced to dance until he collapses once more.

The Devil reminds the couple that they may have defeated him for the moment but if they should cross the border between her father’s kingdom and the land where the Soldier grew up, the Devil will regain power over them both. Over a solemn chorale (the Great Chorale), the Narrator warns the Soldier (and us) not to wish for too much: “One happy thing is every happy thing; two is as if they had never been.” Though blissfully married, the Princess persuades the Soldier to return to his native land. The Soldier hopes that he can have it all: a loving wife and a reunion with his beloved mother. Despite the Devil’s warning and one last hesitation, the Soldier crosses the frontier. With a triumphant cackle, the Devil snatches back the fiddle and leads the Soldier and his bride on a diabolical triumphal march to oblivion.