

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – Concerto for Flute and Harp, K.299

When writing about the flute and harp, it must be recalled in some manner the ancient lineage of these instruments. A ‘bone flute’ recently found at a German archaeological site dates back 40,000 years to the stone age – predating the flutes found in China dated at the 9000 year mark. The harp gets its tradition from the moment a hunter placed a second string on his bow. Of course, these instruments have evolved through biblical times and on to the present era where the transverse metal flute is equally as modern as the upright standing harp.

The combination of these instruments is a natural one where there is an obvious high solo line(flute) that is accompanied by strummed chords(harp) not unlike the music of medieval troubadours. However, the modern combination, really formalized by this concerto by Mozart is so popular that one can barely go to a wedding -in the west - without encountering it.

Mozart – I doubt would have come up with this combination had it not presented itself to him in the form of a commission. The Duke of Guînes, Adrien-Louis de Bonnières who was an amateur flautist had a daughter who played the harp. Mozart’s arrival in Paris, in 1778, was a big moment for him. He writes about the pains he took with his ‘Paris’ Symphony – written in the same year. The letter he wrote dated September 11th, 1778 states that *“our taste in Germany is for length, but really it is better to be short and sweet”*. His inner need to comply and please the Parisian audience – unusual even for Mozart – led to mild mannered readjusting of Parisian compositional norms in the hope that they would appreciate the difference. The Parisians also liked a ‘repetition of phrases’ as opposed to a ‘working through’ of ideas. To paraphrase Dr. Tovey, the penchant for saying each sentence twice, rather like the parallelism of Hebrew poetry but in more of the same words, was a popular format from Couperin to Rimsky-Korsakov.

It was natural that Mozart would look for patronage among the aristocracy. De Guines was a nobleman at the court of Louis XVI and a personal favourite of Marie Antoinette. He distinguished himself as a militarist and a diplomat – serving as ambassador more notably in England than in Berlin. It was definitely an association by which Mozart would have hoped to benefit. His only daughter, Marie-Adrienne the harpist was also to marry well. When the time came for Mozart to collect his fee for the commission from the flautist duke and the 24 lessons on the harp he had given the duke's daughter, de Guînes was unavailable; his housekeeper offering half the agreed amount. "There's noble treatment for you," Mozart wrote to his father.

The harp at this time was really not the extraordinarily versatile and lush instrument it is today. It was used much more in the manner of a plucked piano – and so the writing in this concerto dictates a deliberately pianistic style without glissandi and all the harp sounds to which we have become accustomed. The style of the Concerto is that of Sinfonia Concertante, where the ‘whole’ can be seen as symphonic in style and in which individual instruments don’t gain

untoward prominence. In this same year of 1778, Mozart wrote three more concerti just for flute; his Sinfonia Concertante for flute, oboe, horn and bassoon; six piano sonatas; seven violin sonatas and rounded it all off with his 'Paris' Symphony No. 31. We are all the luckier for Mozart's Parisian sojourn.

Zane Dalal (2009)