

Symphony No. 31 in D Major "Paris" K.297
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Allegro vivace

Andante

Allegro

In respect to composition, 1778 was a relatively normal year for Mozart. He wrote a concerto for flute and harp; three more for just the flute; his Sinfonia Concertante for flute, oboe, horn and bassoon; six piano sonatas; seven violin sonatas and rounded off the year with this symphony. He was twenty-two.

Presenting symphonies in Paris was a daunting task for any composer. There were traditions of form and ways of playing that were expected and demanded by the audience, if works were to be successful. So, it is not strange that even Mozart was eager to comply with the norms of performance. On September 11th, 1778 he wrote to his father "our taste in Germany is for length, but really it is better to be short and sweet." It is true that the Parisians preferred no 'repeats' and thus this symphony is the first sonata-form work before Beethoven with no long repeats. However, Parisians seemed to have preferred phrases and melodies repeated on the spot, so it is actually longer than Mozart's previous symphonies. 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.

There was another tradition called the 'grand coup d'archet', that must have amused Mozart. Literally, this required works, if not movements to begin with unison "striking of the bow". Undoubtedly, this developed from the need to alert the audience to the beginning of the music. Well, he gave the Parisians their traditions...almost! The opening "coups d'archet" become organic and thematic pillars of an extraordinary first movement. The repetition of themes is expanded in true genius fashion and it seems that his extraordinary twenty-two year old mind prevented him from musical forms that were less than extremely profound. As Dr. Tovey points out 'there is not a note without its permanent value, and Mozart is able to use the stupid Parisian conventions as a means of educating the Parisians out of them.' Mozart's letter to his father on July 3rd puts a human perspective on this historic event. "Having observed that all last as well as first allegros begin here with all the instruments playing together, I began mine with two violins only, piano for the first eight bars - followed instantly by a forte; the audience, as I expected, said 'Ssh!...Ssh!' at the soft beginning, and when they heard the forte, began at once to clap their hands. I was so happy that as soon as the symphony was over, I went off to the Palais Royal where I had a large ice, said the Rosary as I had vowed to do - and went home..."

A general perspective is of great benefit here, to re-align these thoughts. Mozart had traveled to Paris in 1777 with his mother, who died there within a few months. This trip to Paris was just before he entered the employ of the Archbishop of Salzburg, a position that he was to come to hate. 1776 had already occurred in America and 1789's French Revolution was only a few years away. Yet, as is usual in the commentary of greatness, one finds that despite the climate of the times and personal tragedy, true genius still manages to turn the world on its head.