

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

Mozartiana

September 30, 2005 - Town Hall Seattle
October 1, 2005 - Rialto Theater Tacoma

Mozart: *Don Giovanni*, Overture
Chopin: Variations on "La ci darem la mano"
Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 21
Tchaikovsky: Suite No. 4, "Mozartiana"

Program notes by C. Chagnard

Mozartiana

Few artists have reached the universality that **Mozart** has gained since his birth 250 years ago. His name has become synonymous with the most universal of musical expressions, transcending cultures and time to stand at the apex of human creative expression.

It was Mozart who inspired the founding of the Northwest Sinfonietta in 1991, and having his big anniversary year coincide with our 15th Anniversary was just too good to miss. So here it is: an entire season of music by Mozart and inspired by him!

I wish I had invented the title "Mozartiana" but I did not. Tchaikovsky did, as a tribute to his favorite composer. This opening program opens with two of Mozart's masterpieces: The overture to his supreme opera *Don Giovanni* and his Piano Concerto No.21, in C.

In July 2005, The Northwest Sinfonietta performed a full production of *Don Giovanni* at the Astoria Music Festival. Our heads are still spinning in the sort of musical bliss that experiencing such perfect work can inspire. So much of its intrinsic drama is contained in the overture, beginning with the ominous opening chord. Never, until 1787, had an opera from Mozart or any other composer begun with such sense of dread and impending tragedy. The striking use of chromaticism and minor harmonies seems to already foreshadow Wagner's musical syntax. One of *Don Giovanni's* most appealing qualities is its exquisite juxtaposition of drama and comedy. (Mozart had described his opera as a "Drama Giocoso".) Following the brooding opening, a brisk Allegro begins filled with high-spirited melodic sparks and jolting soft/loud contrasts, putting the listener in the mood of Leporello's famously comical first monologue.

One of the many aspects of Mozart's genius is the fact that he excelled in every musical form available at the time: symphonies, concertos, operas, chamber music and church music were all subject to his complete mastery. He composed a total of 27 piano concertos (more than any other composer) which he intended for himself as soloist. This extraordinary output is particularly fascinating as it spans Mozart's entire career, having composed his first piano concerto at age 11 and the last in his penultimate year. *Don Giovanni* and his **21st Piano Concerto** are almost contemporaries having been completed in 1787 and 1785 respectively. Beyond this temporal proximity, the C major concerto also shares a very operatic character with constantly unfolding drama through extreme emotional contrasts. The slow movement in particular stands as a sublime example of melodic perfection served by a harmonic language and level of dissonance which must have astounded audience of the late 1700's. Leopold Mozart, Wolfgang's towering father had described this concerto as "astonishingly difficult" giving us a hint to his son's pre-eminent position amongst the finest keyboardists of the time. All of Mozart's piano concertos were premiered with the composer as soloist and conductor and this 21st concerto must have provided its audience with a dazzling display of virtuosity from both the creator

and interpreter as one.

The young **Frédéric Chopin** made a very similar impression on those fortunate enough to share his muse in person. As an adolescent, Chopin already stood out for the distinct character of his compositions and the uniqueness of his playing. As with so many great composers, Chopin admired Mozart above all. For his second Opus, he turned to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* for inspiration and chose the famous aria "La ci darem la mano" as the basis of a theme and variations for piano and orchestra. At age 17, while a student at the conservatory, Chopin dazzled his teachers and audiences with this new composition which showed an entirely new way of writing for the piano. Chopin's transformation of Mozart's famous theme is highly inventive and truly remarkable for such a young composer.

Tchaikovsky once confessed to his patroness Von Meck: "Of all great composers I feel the most affectionate love for Mozart." The idea of a suite based on his favorite composer's music came in 1884 while Tchaikovsky was working on a Russian translation of *The Marriage of Figaro* for a performance at the Moscow Conservatory. It took another three years for work to begin. Tchaikovsky chose a diverse selection of melodies from the Gigue in G, K.574, the Minuet in D, K.355, the famous *Ave Verum Corpus*, K.168, and the Piano Variations K.455 and arranged them in a suite of dances. By mid-summer of 1887, Tchaikovsky had completed the suite and it is clear from his correspondence that this project provided him with great fulfillment and a clear sense of mission. Upon making revision before publication, he stated to his publisher: "A large quantity of Mozart's outstanding smaller works are, for some incomprehensible reason, little known not only to the audience but to many musicians too. The author who arranged this suite entitled *Mozartiana* had in mind to bring about more frequent performances of these pearls of musical art, unassuming in form but full of unattainable beauty." He went on to predict that "I think this suite will have a great future, thanks to the lucky choice of the pieces and the novelty of its character." The most remarkable aspect of this original composition is the way Tchaikovsky adapts 18th century material to a modern form. Throughout the four dances, theme, and 10 variations, Tchaikovsky displays great sensitivity to Mozart's distinct artistry while contributing his unmistakable style to create a perfect tribute to the most universal of composers.