Widely considered the dean of British clarinetists up to his death in 2003, Jack Brymer once said that "the ability to play the clarinet is the ability to overcome the imperfections of the instrument," adding that "there's no such thing as a perfect clarinet, never was and never will be." Brymer was working as a schoolteacher and had just given his debut recital on BBC Radio when his friend Dennis Brain, the prominent horn player, suggested that he audition for the empty first clarinet chair in Britain's new Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1947. He was picked by conductor Thomas Beecham and remained with the Royal Philharmonic for 16 years, later joining the BBC Symphony (1963-1972) and the London Symphony (1972-1985, retiring on his 70th birthday). Brymer's three recordings of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto are considered classics, and one was heard in the film Out of Africa. He also recorded other clarinet and wind ensemble music of Mozart, as well as several Romantic-era concertos, but he knew and performed more music than he ever recorded. One other Jack Brymer performance that everyone knows, however, is that of the clarinet part in the long orchestral crescendo in the Beatles' "A Day in the Life." Atypically for players of his time, Brymer also investigated music by some of the lesser-known composers of the Classical era. Brymer wrote two books, hosted radio programs, and served as a professor at several top British music schools, including the Royal Military School of Music. From time to time he played jazz clarinet in British clubs, and he also recorded as part of the jazz group of his best-known student, saxophonist John Harle.

MOZART

Wind Music

Serenade In C Minor, K.388

Serenade In B. K. 361

London Wind Soloists directed by Jack Brymer

The Kohlmarkt in 1786 *engraving by C. Schütz*

As was also the case with his contemporaries, Mozart composed relatively little music in minor keys. When he did so it was almost always with specific purpose, and in forms that we would today consider "serious" -- the string quartet, the symphony and concerto. How then are we to account for a serenade (Mozart's own rubric for K. 388, unlike the Wind Serenade in E flat, K. 375, which he left untitled) in the minor mode composed for wind instruments? After all, the serenade was traditionally a work for light, relaxed entertainment on ceremonial or civic occasions. Those composed for wind band, or Harmoniemusik, in particular were associated with outdoor entertainment -- pieces to be casually overheard rather than listened to intently. Yet there is every evidence that after he settled in Vienna in 1781, Mozart took the genre seriously; all three wind serenades he composed during 1781 and 1782 are major works that far transcend the normal modest ambitions of such works.

The composer himself told his father Leopold in a letter that he had taken particular care over the E flat Serenade, although this may be because he was hoping to impress the Emperor Joseph II, who in the spring of 1782 had formed his own Harmoniemusik consisting of eight, rather than the usual six, performers. We know a fair amount about the genesis of that work and its revision from sextet to octet; virtually nothing, however, is known about Mozart's motivation to compose of the C minor Serenade other than the fact that it dates from much the same period as K. 375, July 1782 -- the date on Mozart's own autograph manuscript. Was it perhaps also designed in the hope of making an impression on the new Emperor (Joseph had been on the throne only two years)?

Whatever the reason, this radical work -- with its stormy, explosive opening Allegro, and "learned" canonic Minuet, and its contrapuntal complexity -- was totally out of keeping with then-current expectations for the genre, and one can only guess at the composer's reasons. Mozart never mentioned the work in his correspondence, and no documentary evidence relating to it has yet emerged. Like the revised version of K. 375, it is scored for the octet forces of Joseph's Harmoniemusik -- pairs of oboes, clarinets, horns and bassoons.

That Mozart himself was obviously aware of the serenade's unusual and atypical character (and perhaps quality) may be gauged by the fact that several years later, probably in 1788, he arranged it for a very different genre, transforming it into the String Quintet in C minor, K. 406 (K. 516b).

Music for wind ensemble played an important role in Mozart's Austria. Known as Harmoniemusik, such ensembles were based on a nucleus of a pair of bassoons to provide the bass, and two horns. Upper parts were provided by one or more pairs of treble winds, most frequently oboes and clarinets. Dispositions of this kind not only formed the basis of military bands, but also the Hausmusik of the lesser nobility, for whom wind ensembles were not only cheaper than employing a full orchestra, but also had the advantage of being suitable for both outdoor and indoor performance. Mozart himself introduces one function of Harmoniemusik in the supper scene of Don Giovanni, where the Don is seen enjoying his supper to the accompaniment of some of the popular operatic tunes of the day played by his own wind ensemble.

During his earlier years in Salzburg, Mozart composed eight wind divertimentos, works almost certainly designed for outdoor use, and primarily intended to fall pleasingly on the ear as little more than background music. Mozart being Mozart, many movements, of course, transcend such modest pretensions. Nevertheless, the three great wind serenades Mozart composed after settling in Vienna in 1781 elevate the form to unprecedented heights. While only one, the Serenade in C Minor, K. 388, can be dated with any degree of certainty, it appears that all three were composed during the composer's first two years in Vienna. The first and most obvious difference between the Serenade in B flat and its Salzburg predecessors is the huge expansion in scale, both in terms of instrumentation and length. Instead of six (or eight) instruments, K. 361 is scored for no less than thirteen--pairs of oboes, clarinets, basset horns (lower pitched members of the clarinet family), horns in F and B flat, and bassoons, with the bottom line strengthened by a string double bass. The presence of a double bass suggests that the work was intended for indoor rather than outdoor performance; this notion is augmented by the first recorded performance, which took place at a benefit concert given on March 23, 1784 at the Burgtheater in Vienna. The concert was to benefit Mozart's friend Anton Stadler, a brilliant clarinetist and basset horn player for whom he later composed both the Clarinet Quintet in A major, K. 581 and Concerto in A major, K. 622. A member of the audience who heard the performance recorded the effect it made on him: "...glorious and sublime! It consisted of thirteen instruments...At each instrument sat a master--oh, what an effect it made--glorious and grand, excellent and sublime." One curious aspect of the report by this enthusiastic auditor is that he mentions the work as being in four movements, whereas K. 361 has no less than seven: Largo - Molto allegro; Menuetto; Adagio; Menuetto (Allegretto); Romance; Theme and Variations; Finale (Molto allegro). This leads to the conclusion that Stadler's "first" performance only included part of the work, a procedure frequently followed in early published editions. Whatever the somewhat mysterious background to this unique work, modern listeners will surely echo those sentiments penned over 200 years ago -- glorious, grand, excellent, and sublime are indeed just epithets.

MOZART

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Serenade In C Minor, K.388
Serenade In B. K. 361

London Wind Soloists directed by Jack Brymer

Serenade In C Minor, K.388

1. Allegro 8:25
2. Andante 4:51
3. Menuetto In Canone 4:56
4. Allegro 6:29

Total Time: 24:41

Serenade In B. K. 361

5. Largo - Allegro Molto 7:39
6. Menuetto 11:13
7. Adagio 4:48
8. Menuetto (Allegretto) 6:45
9. Romanza (Adagio - Allegretto) 6:48
10. Tema Con Variazioni (Andante) 3:20
11. Rondo (Allegro Molto) 3:29

Total Time: 44:02

Transferred from a 15ips 2-track tape Recorded by Decca 1962
Producer: Erik Smith Engineer: Michael Savage & Gordon Parry

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