Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphony No. 38 in D major, K. 504, 'Prague'

Among the orchestral works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the Symphony No. 38 in D major, K. 504, commonly known as the 'Prague' Symphony, stands as one of his most dramatic and forward-looking achievements. Written in late 1786 and first performed in Prague in January 1787, the work belongs to a period of extraordinary creative maturity that also produced *The Marriage of Figaro* and, soon afterwards, Don *Giovanni*.

The symphony owes its nickname to the city in which it first achieved major success. Prague audiences had embraced Mozart with remarkable enthusiasm, especially after the triumph of *Figaro*. While Viennese audiences had admired the opera, Prague adored it. Contemporary reports describe a city captivated by Mozart's music, and when the composer arrived there in January 1787 he was greeted as a celebrity. The premiere of the symphony, given at a concert organised in his honour, was met with overwhelming acclaim and helped secure the commission for *Don Giovanni* later that same year.

The 'Prague' Symphony occupies an important place not only within Mozart's output, but also in the historical development of the symphony itself. During the eighteenth century, the symphony evolved from relatively lightweight orchestral entertainment into a genre capable of profound emotional and structural ambition. Alongside Joseph Haydn, Mozart was central to that transformation, and the 'Prague' demonstrates just how dramatically the genre had expanded by the 1780s.

Unlike many earlier symphonies designed primarily for courtly entertainment, this work possesses unusual scale, seriousness, and psychological intensity. Its broad opening movement, imposing slow introduction, and sophisticated thematic development suggest a work intended for concentrated listening rather than social background music. In this sense, the symphony anticipates the heightened expressive ambitions later associated with Ludwig van Beethoven.

One striking feature is Mozart's decision to omit the customary minuet movement. By the 1780s, the four-movement symphonic structure had become standard, but Mozart instead adopts a concentrated three-movement design. The omission of the minuet avoids interrupting the symphony's dramatic momentum and gives the work an unusual sense of unity and intensity.

The 'Prague' can be considered to be Mozart's most 'operatic' symphony. Throughout the work, instrumental themes behave almost as theatrical characters. They converse, interrupt, overlap, and transform one another with extraordinary dramatic vitality. The influence of Mozart's operatic style is unmistakable, particularly the emotional complexity of *Figaro* and the darker dramatic world of *Don Giovanni*.

Equally important is the sophistication of the orchestration. Mozart gives the woodwind instruments an unusually independent role, allowing them to comment on and shape the musical argument rather than merely reinforce the strings. This richer orchestral texture helped expand the expressive possibilities of the Classical orchestra and pointed toward the more colouristic symphonic writing of the nineteenth century.

The work also reflects Mozart's growing interest in contrapuntal technique, inspired by his study of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel during the 1780s. Complex counterpoint is seamlessly integrated into the symphony's dramatic flow, combining intellectual sophistication with theatrical immediacy in a way that would deeply influence later composers. Mozart was forging a contrapuntal path that found it's apotheosis in the finale of his last symphony (no. 41- the 'Jupiter').

Listening Guide

I. Adagio – Allegro

The symphony begins with one of Mozart's most imposing slow introductions. Dark orchestral chords, chromatic harmonies, and dramatic silences create an atmosphere of tension and anticipation. This is no mere ceremonial preface. The introduction establishes a psychological depth rare in eighteenth-century symphonic writing and foreshadows the dramatic world of *Don Giovanni*- it almost feels like a symphonic practice-run for that opera.

When the Allegro begins, the mood shifts abruptly into nervous energy and brilliance. The movement unfolds with extraordinary momentum, driven by restless rhythms and sharply contrasted themes. Notable is the operatic quality of the musical dialogue, particularly the exchanges between strings and winds. Themes seem to interact almost like characters in an ensemble scene.

Mozart's handling of development is especially innovative. Rather than simply repeating and decorating themes, he subjects them to dramatic transformation and contrapuntal interplay, creating a sense of mounting tension and release. The movement's scale and expressive ambition significantly expand the symphony's traditional boundaries.

II. Andante

The Andante offers lyrical contrast, though its serenity is never entirely free from shadow. The movement unfolds with the expressive warmth of an operatic aria, characterised by graceful melodic lines and delicate orchestral colour.

Particularly striking is the independence of the wind writing. Flutes, oboes, and bassoons engage in intimate dialogue with the strings, enriching the texture with subtle colour and emotional nuance. Mozart treats the orchestra almost vocally, allowing instrumental lines to 'sing' with remarkable expressive freedom.

Beneath the movement's elegance lie moments of harmonic instability and darker emotional undertones. This balance between refinement and melancholy recalls the emotional ambiguity found in Mozart's mature operas, where comedy and seriousness coexist in close proximity.

III. Finale: Presto

The finale bursts forth with exhilarating energy. Its rapid motion, rhythmic drive, and brilliant orchestral interplay evoke the bustling ensemble finales of *The Marriage of Figaro*. The movement displays Mozart's extraordinary ability to sustain excitement while maintaining complete structural clarity.

The contrapuntal writing is especially remarkable. Themes overlap and interweave with astonishing fluency, demonstrating the synthesis of learned technique and dramatic spontaneity that characterises Mozart's late style. Yet despite its sophistication, the music never loses its sense of playfulness or theatrical vitality.

As the movement drives toward its close, the symphony achieves a feeling of jubilant release. The final pages radiate confidence, brilliance, and exuberance, bringing the work to a triumphant conclusion.

The 'Prague' Symphony stands at a pivotal moment in the history of music. Firmly rooted in the Classical ideals of balance and clarity, it nevertheless pushes the symphony toward greater dramatic intensity, structural integration, and emotional depth. In doing so, Mozart helped redefine what the symphony could achieve.

The work forms a bridge between eras: between courtly entertainment and serious artistic expression, between Classical elegance and Romantic drama, and between the eighteenth-century

symphony and the monumental symphonic tradition that would follow. More than two centuries later, the 'Prague' remains one of Mozart's most compelling demonstrations of the symphony's power to unite intellect, drama, and expressive beauty.

Camille Saint-Saëns: Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33

Camille Saint-Saëns's Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33 occupies a unique position in the nineteenth-century concerto repertoire. Compact, elegant, and brilliantly constructed, the work avoids the expansive rhetoric and overt virtuoso display associated with many Romantic concertos. Instead, Saint-Saëns combines Classical clarity with Romantic lyricism and technical brilliance in a concerto whose refinement and structural ingenuity have secured its place as one of the most enduring works for cello and orchestra.

Composed in 1872, the concerto emerged during a turbulent period in French history, only shortly after the Franco-Prussian War and the upheaval of the Paris Commune. French musicians of the period faced pressing questions about national identity and the future of French music. Saint-Saëns became one of the leading figures in the effort to restore and redefine French musical culture, advocating for clarity, craftsmanship, and independence from overwhelming German influence while still deeply admiring composers such as Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner.

As both composer and public intellectual, Saint-Saëns occupied a central place in French musical life. A prodigious pianist and organist, admired by contemporaries for his astonishing technique and intellect, he became associated with a distinctly French ideal of elegance, balance, and precision. In 1871 he helped found the Société Nationale de Musique, an organisation dedicated to promoting French instrumental music at a time when opera dominated the nation's musical culture.

Although later generations sometimes regarded Saint-Saëns as conservative, his influence on French music was profound. He helped establish a tradition of orchestral clarity and formal discipline that shaped composers including Gabriel Fauré, Maurice Ravel, and Francis Poulenc. Poulenc, in particular, inherited from Saint-Saëns an appreciation for melodic directness, wit, transparency of texture, and the distinctly French preference for clarity over excessive emotional grandiosity. Even where later French composers reacted against Saint-Saëns' classicism, they did so in dialogue with traditions he had helped establish.

The concerto also occupies an important place within Saint-Saëns' own output. He composed five piano concertos, three violin concertos, two cello concertos, and numerous shorter concertante works. Throughout these works he demonstrated an exceptional understanding of instrumental technique and orchestral balance. The First Cello Concerto is widely regarded as the finest of his concertos after the popular Second Piano Concerto and Third Violin Concerto, and for many listeners it remains his greatest achievement in the genre.

The work was composed for the celebrated cellist Auguste Tolbecque and premiered in Paris in 1873. At a time when the cello concerto repertoire remained relatively limited compared with that of the violin or piano, Saint-Saëns produced a work that expanded the expressive and technical possibilities of the instrument without sacrificing structural economy. Unlike many Romantic concertos, which separate movements with formal pauses, the concerto unfolds as a continuous structure in which its three sections are seamlessly connected. This innovation gives the work unusual momentum and coherence.

Listening Guide

I. Allegro non troppo

The concerto opens with extraordinary directness. Rather than a lengthy orchestral introduction, the solo cello enters almost immediately with a forceful, declamatory statement. This dramatic opening establishes the work's concentrated character and places the soloist at the centre of the musical argument from the very beginning.

The principal theme combines urgency with elegance, qualities that remain central throughout the concerto. Saint-Saëns avoids excessive orchestral density, allowing the cello to project clearly while maintaining constant dialogue with the orchestra. Listen particularly for the rhythmic vitality of the movement and the composer's remarkable economy. Themes are developed concisely and efficiently, with little unnecessary repetition.

Although technically demanding, the solo writing rarely feels purely virtuosic for its own sake. Rapid passagework, double stops, and brilliant figurations emerge naturally from the musical structure rather than interrupting it. Saint-Saëns balances Romantic expressiveness with Classical restraint, creating a movement of considerable energy and refinement.

II. Allegretto con moto

Without pause, the concerto moves into a lighter central section that resembles a graceful minuet. Here Saint-Saëns reveals another side of the cello's character: elegant, lyrical, and conversational rather than dramatic.

The orchestration becomes especially delicate, often allowing woodwinds and strings to accompany the soloist with chamber-like transparency. The movement's poised elegance reflects Saint-Saëns' admiration for eighteenth-century French style, though filtered through a Romantic harmonic language.

At the centre of the movement comes a more animated episode that briefly increases tension before the opening gracefulness returns. Throughout, the cello sings with warmth and flexibility rather than overt emotional intensity.

III. Tempo primo

The final section emerges organically from the preceding music and recalls material from earlier in the concerto, helping unify the work as a single continuous span. The principal theme returns transformed, now carrying greater brilliance and momentum.

The finale demands extraordinary agility from the soloist. Fast passagework, wide leaps, and rapid exchanges with the orchestra generate excitement while preserving the concerto's characteristic clarity. Saint-Saëns' orchestration remains remarkably transparent even at moments of maximum virtuosity.

The work drives toward a concise and exhilarating conclusion. Unlike many nineteenth-century concertos that seek monumental grandeur, Saint-Saëns ends with brilliance, precision, and controlled exhilaration.

Since its premiere, the First Cello Concerto has enjoyed a remarkably stable place within the cello repertoire. While some nineteenth-century concertos have fluctuated dramatically in popularity, Saint-Saëns' concerto has remained consistently admired by performers, audiences, and teachers alike. Part of its enduring success lies in its balance between virtuosity and accessibility. The concerto is technically challenging enough to showcase a soloist's brilliance, yet concise enough to avoid the excessive length and rhetorical heaviness that can make some Romantic concertos difficult for audiences.

Since the advent of LP in the mid-twentieth century, the concerto has proven popular with recording artists; in the concert hall it is sometimes overshadowed by larger-scale Romantic concertos such as those by Antonín Dvořák or Edward Elgar, works whose broader emotional scope often suits large symphonic programmes. Nevertheless, Saint-Saëns' concerto remains one of the foundational works of the cello repertoire and is frequently performed by both emerging and established soloists. More than 150 years after its premiere, the concerto continues to exemplify Saint-Saëns' distinctive ability to combine brilliance, clarity, and expressive charm within perfectly balanced musical forms.

Felix Mendelssohn: *The Fair Melusine* Overture, Op. 32

Felix Mendelssohn's concert overture *The Fair Melusine* (*Die schöne Melusine*), Op. 32, belongs to the remarkable series of orchestral overtures through which the composer helped redefine the possibilities of orchestral programme music during the early Romantic period. Written in 1833 and revised shortly afterwards, the work combines Mendelssohn's characteristic formal elegance with a vivid atmosphere of fantasy, mystery, and supernatural enchantment.

Like the overtures to A Midsummer Night's Dream and *The Hebrides*, *The Fair Melusine* demonstrates Mendelssohn's extraordinary ability to evoke landscapes, characters, and dramatic situations through purely orchestral means. Yet among his overtures, *Melusine* is perhaps the most elusive and psychologically ambiguous, suspended between beauty and unease, lyricism and menace.

The overture originated in 1833 after Mendelssohn attended a performance in Berlin of Conradin Kreutzer's opera *Melusina*. Mendelssohn admired the legend that inspired the opera far more than the opera itself, later remarking that the story deserved "better music." Rather than composing a stage work of his own, he instead wrote an independent concert overture based on the legend.

There are, however, two versions of the piece. Mendelssohn initially completed the overture in 1833, but soon became dissatisfied with aspects of the orchestration and structure. He subsequently revised the work, tightening the form and refining the orchestral writing. The second version, which is the version most commonly performed today and the version heard in this performance, was published as Op. 32 and represents Mendelssohn's final thoughts on the piece.

The revisions reveal Mendelssohn's meticulous craftsmanship. Although the overture sounds spontaneous and atmospheric, its construction is exceptionally controlled. The revised version achieves greater structural clarity while preserving the fluid, almost dreamlike quality that defines the work.

The overture belongs to a broader moment in Mendelssohn's career in which he was exploring the idea of the concert overture as a self-contained poetic work. Alongside *The Hebrides* and *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, *The Fair Melusine* helped establish a model for Romantic orchestral music that sought not merely to illustrate a story but to evoke its emotional and psychological world.

The Legend of Melusine

The overture draws inspiration from the medieval European legend of Melusine, a supernatural water spirit or fairy. In the best-known version of the story, Melusine marries a mortal nobleman, Raymond, on the condition that he never attempt to see her on certain days. Eventually he breaks this promise and discovers her secret: from the waist down she possesses the tail of a serpent or fish. Betrayed, Melusine disappears forever into the supernatural realm.

The legend fascinated Romantic artists because it combined several themes central to nineteenth-century imagination: the supernatural feminine, the seductive mystery of nature, unattainable

beauty, and the tragic consequences of forbidden knowledge. Melusine belongs to a long tradition of mythic female water figures whose beauty conceals danger or sorrow.

Unlike some later Romantic depictions of supernatural women, however, Melusine is not portrayed simply as destructive. Mendelssohn's treatment is notable for its sympathy and tenderness. The overture seems less interested in dramatic narrative than in capturing the fluid and unstable boundary between the human and supernatural worlds.

Nymphs, Mermaids, and Water Spirits in Romantic Music

During the Romantic period, composers became increasingly fascinated by mythological and supernatural female figures associated with water and nature. Such characters allowed composers to explore themes of longing, transformation, erotic mystery, and the sublime power of nature.

Melusine belongs to the same imaginative world as the Rhine maidens in Der Ring des Nibelungen by Richard Wagner, the water spirit Rusalka in Rusalka by Antonín Dvořák, and the Lorelei legends that inspired numerous nineteenth-century songs and orchestral works. Earlier Romantic examples include Undine and E. T. A. Hoffmann's novella *Undine*, both centred on water spirits seeking connection with the human world.

Mendelssohn's treatment differs significantly from many later Romantic depictions. Wagner and Dvořák often emphasise sensuality, tragedy, or overwhelming emotional intensity, whereas Mendelssohn approaches the supernatural with Classical restraint and transparency. His orchestral writing evokes enchantment not through massive sonorities or overt drama, but through texture, motion, and atmosphere.

In this sense, *The Fair Melusine* occupies an important transitional position in Romantic programme music. It retains the balance and clarity inherited from Classical forms while opening the door to the more psychologically suggestive orchestral landscapes later explored by composers such as Hector Berlioz and Wagner.

Listening Guide

The overture opens almost immediately with one of Mendelssohn's most evocative musical ideas: a flowing figure in the strings that gently rises and falls like moving water. This undulating motion forms the emotional and atmospheric foundation of the entire work. Rather than presenting a forceful dramatic statement, Mendelssohn invites the listener into a world of fluidity and uncertainty.

Above this shimmering accompaniment emerges a graceful clarinet melody often associated with Melusine herself. The theme possesses elegance and warmth, yet also a certain emotional distance, suggesting a figure who remains ultimately unattainable and mysterious.

The overture displays remarkable transparency of orchestration; Mendelssohn avoids heavy textures, allowing woodwinds and strings to interact with chamber-like delicacy. The orchestral colour is constantly shifting, creating an impression of flickering light on water.

A more agitated secondary idea gradually introduces tension into the music. Brass and lower strings darken the atmosphere, hinting at the conflict and betrayal embedded within the legend. Yet Mendelssohn never allows the overture to become violently dramatic. Even its climaxes remain controlled and elegant.

Particularly striking is the way Mendelssohn balances sonata form with atmospheric continuity. Themes return transformed by changing orchestral colours and harmonic contexts, much as waves repeatedly alter the appearance of a landscape.

Near the conclusion, the music seems briefly to regain its earlier serenity, but the sense of mystery remains unresolved. The overture does not provide a triumphant ending or explicit narrative conclusion. Instead, Melusine appears to recede once more into the supernatural realm from which she emerged.

The Fair Melusine reveals Mendelssohn at his most subtle and imaginative. Combining Classical poise with Romantic atmosphere, the overture transforms a medieval legend into a work of extraordinary orchestral refinement and emotional ambiguity.

Although less frequently performed than *The Hebrides* or the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture, *The Fair Melusine* remains one of Mendelssohn's most sophisticated orchestral achievements. Its shimmering textures, fluid structure, and haunting atmosphere capture the Romantic fascination with the supernatural while preserving the elegance and clarity that define Mendelssohn's unique musical voice.