

EL PASO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
APRIL 24 & 25, 2026
PROGRAM NOTES

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born January 27, 1756 – Salzburg, Austria

Died December 5, 1791 – Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 29, K.543 in E-flat major

Most associate Mozart with musical perfection. An astonishing natural talent, the extent of which rarely has been seen in human history. However, if we move past the grandeur and analyze Mozart's output as if he were anyone else, we can find that the iconic Austrian displayed the same patterns and struggles as other composers.

As is the case with most composers, Mozart's modern popularity revolves around his works that are now regarded as classics: *The Requiem*, several of the piano concertos, the later operas, and *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, among others. Of course, Mozart's contributions far outstretch these selected works, and looking at the broad spectrum of his catalogue reveals some curious things.

One of Mozart's most interesting genres is the symphony. Although the symphony as we know it today was invented during the time of Bach, it was still very new by the time Mozart made his first attempt in 1764 at the age of 8. Mozart's mentor and friend, Joseph Haydn, began tackling the symphony genre in 1759 and would become its most crucial advocate, completing 104 of them and carrying the genre into early 19th-century popularity. Later, a German from Bonn named Ludwig van Beethoven would spend over two decades redefining the symphony as the most powerful form of "absolute music."

Mozart, on the other hand, while prolific within the symphony genre, would not capture the same glamour long-term. While some of Mozart's symphonies are powerful pieces of standard orchestral repertoire from the classical era, those take us once again to the composer's "classics."

Symphony No. 39, K. 543 in E-flat major is one of those "classics" and towards the very center of Mozart's well-known symphonies. It is the first of the composer's final three, all written back-to-back in the summer months of 1788. *Symphonies 39, 40, and 41* all share the same conundrum of unknown exact premiere dates, or whether Mozart ever heard them played at all. Regardless, they are recorded and programmed frequently and represent the genre in full force before the composers of the 19th century brought it to new heights.

Carl Orff

Born July 10, 1895 – Munich, Germany

Died March 29, 1982 – Munich, Germany

Carmina Burana

The 20th century was a time of musical redefinition and new beginnings. The traditions of the past millennium were both kept in place and cast aside, all in search of the same goal: to re-explore boundaries in search of new beauty. Perhaps the greatest side effect of such thought was the emergence of some pieces that escape traditional categorization; music that embraced a fresh idea as its

identity. This formula was captured to a “T” by German composer Carl Orff in 1937. *Carmina Burana: Secular songs for singers and chorus to be sung together with instruments and magical images* remains one of the 20th century’s most iconic and unique large-scale works.

Carmina Burana’s first area of curiosity comes from its proposed “genre.” Today it is labeled a cantata, a genre that saw its heyday during the Baroque era. Cantatas are vocal compositions with orchestral accompaniment, free from staging. Although they don’t need to be secular or liturgical in nature, the vast majority of the cantata’s popularity today lies in the church cantata output of Johann Sebastian Bach. A devout Lutheran, Bach composed 250 liturgical cantatas that represent some of his most impressive musical contributions.

Although the cantata has been closely tied with liturgy for centuries, secular examples are not unheard of. Bach himself composed roughly 50 cantatas that were free of liturgical subject matter, and the genre would be periodically explored throughout both the classical and romantic eras. By the time of modernism, the cantata had mostly shifted away from faith-based themes and into highly personal, historical, and political topics. *Alexander Nevsky*, Sergei Prokofiev’s cantata about the 13th-century war hero, and Arnold Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* are perfect examples. However, the work along these lines that has withstood the test of time, seeing performances regularly all around the world, is *Carmina Burana*.

The *Carmina Burana* is a book of Latin poems compiled in the early 19th-century. The poems themselves are secular, dating from the 11th and 12th centuries. Starting in 1934, Carl Orff chose 24 of the poems to set to music, creating the five-part cantata sharing the name *Carmina Burana*. The piece premiered in Frankfurt in 1937 and has enjoyed success ever since.

Nathan Black is the general manager of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras and a section cellist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he produces and hosts 88.5 FM KTEP’s *El Paso Symphony Orchestra Broadcast*, and as of 2022 is the resident lecturer of EPSO’s “Opening Notes” series.