Mozart, Symphony no 40 in G minor

For me, the predictability of a great deal of Classical music isn’t of such great interest. This was a time of what was called, ‘Patronage’. Musicians tended to be employed by someone rich, basically as a servant or a ‘human record player’. They composed music, performed it and repaired their instruments as part of their ‘duties’. Therefore having a preset formula to write music to was very attractive to them. It sped up their rate of composition very nicely and enabled composers to compose a massive amount of music. For instance, Haydn wrote 104 (or more) symphonies and Mozart, 41 of them.

The thing is, having a formula is nice in that you know what’s coming up in terms of structure so it becomes more of what you do within that structure that perhaps differentiates you from everyone else. That’s where Mozart slots in. Haydn was quite happy serving the Esterhazy family and he accepted his position in life with great happiness.

If you checked the link, they were a really rich family and so could afford a ‘human juke box’. Haydn was content for most of his life, serving them. They also allowed him out as well though and he visited London!! There is something really charming about Haydn’s ‘simplicity’ of style and acceptance of the Sonata principle. It’s good honest music that follows the rules of the time with some little quirks that makes him stand out as a great musician too.

Mozart was most definitely NOT happy to be a servant. He was extremely creative and brought up as a kind of child superstar by his violin playing father. He was treated like something special, so why would a kid brought up this way accept the confines of being a servant to someone who possibly knew very little about music? He often got himself into deep water by saying outspoken things and basically by being quite eccentric as a person. Often, very deep water!!

With someone having such a great talent (and knowing it), it might be difficult for him to accept the ‘compositional rules’ of the day. However, he really ‘moulded the big form of the time in a very creative way.

The form that I am talking about is Sonata Form. This was the basis of so much in the Classical Era. Music written to a formula.

This part may switch you off and requires that you know something about keys:

This is how Sonata Form went ....
**Exposition** consisting of;

- Melody 1 in the tonic key
- Link
- Melody 2 in the dominant key (something that would ‘oppose’ melody 1)
- Link
- The whole lot repeated.

**Development**

This would be the creative section, where the composer might use some of the contrapuntal musical styles from the Baroque period, change key, insert musical sequences and play musical tricks with the two melodies introduced in the Exposition.

**Recapitulation**

- Melody 1 repeated in the tonic.
- Link
- Melody 2 repeated but in the tonic
- Link to
- Coda (ending)

The point of sonata form was to introduce the idea of **musical contrast** without stopping and changing movement. In the Baroque period, composers stayed in the same mood throughout a movement. In the Classical period, the idea of real contrast appeared. So melody 1 could be say, disjointed and melody 2, smooth. It gave them something really useful to play around with in the development section.

Concert halls were rare. Rich people had big homes but not always huge so the orchestra was standardised. Some really rich people had a concert hall to play in.

The Classical orchestra became:

- String section – 2 sets of violins, violas, ‘cellos, bass.
- Two of each woodwind.
- Two French Horns and perhaps two Trumpets. (The Bach brass technique was somehow lost and brass seemed to get very boring parts in the Classical era. Still no valves.)
- Two timpani (No pedals 0 manually tuned to doh and soh. The tonic and dominant)

You see, everything becoming ‘standardised’. They sat in standard places and the conductor was becoming important to hold everything together.

The strings did the bulk of the work and the harpsichord was dropped from the orchestra. Now it was standardised, the orchestra became an entity in its own right. Recorders were dropped and wooden flutes took their place. Instruments were starting to be made...
better so they could play even more difficult things and Mozart really exploited that. That’s also part of what makes Mozart so great. He exploited and composed music that was so fitting for every instrument that he wrote for – almost as though he played them himself. He had a kind of affinity with them so that playing his music seems so comfortable.

So, all this rambling about the Classical Period, but it puts everything into context and explains why things happened when Mozart was alive and what he was working with. It is important to understand this when listening to his music since then, if you know the constraints that he was forced to work under, you start to see what a genius he was in ‘bending’ the formal rules in order to produce something really way ahead of so many others.

I won’t do too much analysis of the 40th Symphony, but I am suggesting that you try listening to it first without knowing too much about its structure. Then go back and listen again so you can detect the ‘prison bars’ of sonata form and how he magically turned it into lovely music rather than just a predictable formula.

The key is G minor. For some reason, this was a significant key for Mozart. His more ‘felt’ music tends to be in this key. G minor has a melancholy sound if you play it for instance on a piano and I must admit, as a musician, I also find it to be a ‘sad’, disturbed key. Why? I have no idea. It’s just the way some of us are ‘tuned.’ Mozart was the same. He ‘felt’ keys.

The first subject, or melody is a slightly disturbed tune with this ‘panting background. The melody is played by the strings. Then the link takes us to the smoother melody that has chromatic notes included (out of key) and it is in what is called the relative major key of Bb major. Then a link before the exposition is played again. Notice the clarinet? That was quite a new instrument in those days and Mozart features it in the second subject quite a lot. (He wrote a clarinet concerto as well)

The development section begins with some sudden changes of key and Mozart plays around with theme 1; even giving the bass instruments a turn. Here, he writes in the older Baroque style using contrapuntal parts for a while. (weaving parts) It becomes quite dramatic for a Classical piece of music and following a flute link, the recapitulation starts nice and smoothly.

Standard sonata form but it’s what Mozart does with the links and melodies. Also, he wasn’t keen on repeating things exactly so if you looked at the music, you’d see minor changes to things on the second time. This is what happens in the recapitulation and the second melody is played in the minor key, not major and sounds again, quite disturbed before the piece goes into the coda.

The Symphony as a form is also in a set order.

The first movement in Sonata form.
The second is normally slow (as it is here)
The third is normally a minuet or light hearted.
The fourth is normally a return to Sonata form or Rondo Form, which I will describe in another article on form.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony

This symphony follows the expected pattern but hopefully, you will notice the twists and turns that Mozart introduced and little unexpected things contained inside something so ‘formal’.
There are so many recordings of the 40th Symphony. It’s a late Classical work, when composers started to really challenge the formal structure imposed on them at the time. Mozart didn’t particularly get on with rules and he challenged the set patterns, which is partially why we see him as a great composer.

Apart from that, he was a brilliant orchestrator and wrote beautiful melodies as well.

Maybe you could suggest a good recording of this piece?

Mozart ............................................. and his rival, and friend ............Haydn